

WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS: PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Week One: Is Christ Divided? (1 Corinthians 1:1-17)

Today, we usually remember the New Testament church in Corinth as a congregation with a wide assortment of problems. In Paul's first letter to this church, we see the apostle address many of these problems, and we also see the ways that he advises the believers in Corinth to deal with them. He gives them some procedures to implement, but these are simple, rather obvious steps. The real problem in Corinth was not a lack of methods, but a lack of spiritual perspective.

Running through the epistle is the contrast between wisdom and foolishness. This is by no means an endorsement of the kind of factual knowledge that the worldly call wisdom - indeed, Paul emphasizes that, "has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20). What the Corinthians need is spiritual wisdom, an ability to discern what truly matters, and the capacity to distinguish unimportant worldly matters from things of spiritual value. Paul refers to this kind of understanding as, "a message of wisdom among the mature" (1 Cor. 2:6) and as, "words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:13).

Despite the many sins and other problems in the church of Christ in Corinth, Paul addresses them as brothers and sisters in the Lord, beloved to him and fully equal to him spiritually (1 Cor. 1:1-9). Though this is a notoriously dysfunctional congregation, he describes it as "enriched in every way", "not lack(ing) any spiritual gift"; and he assures them that, "you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the congregation, there were doubtlessly some believers whose faith had gotten derailed to the point that they were committing blatant, obvious sins; others whose confusion or discouragement had caused them to lose their zeal, so that they were no longer fully involved in ministry; and still others who were still devoting themselves to ministry in spite of all the problems. It is crucial to notice that Paul does not differentiate among these - he does not promote divisions, and he never suggests that the 'zealous' believers consider leaving the ones who are struggling.

On the contrary, Paul's first major point is that they all - struggling and strong, zealous and discouraged - must come together (1 Cor. 1:10-17). In order to be "perfectly united in mind and thought", they are going to have to set aside their individual agendas and projects, and especially their idolatry of human leaders. We either follow Jesus, or else we follow a human leader's version of Jesus - we cannot do both.

Following a human leader is easy for the flesh, because it requires only that we select someone that we 'agree with' or 'feel comfortable with', and from then on we let that person do the thinking and planning. Following Jesus himself requires that we do so with all our hearts, because it calls us to accept spiritual responsibility and to seek spiritual understanding. It is more difficult, but it is the only genuine way to put the gospel into practice.

Christ is not divided, nor has any human being been crucified for us. Only Jesus deserves our unquestioning allegiance and our unhesitating loyalty. Our unwillingness to do this is one of the root causes of so many problems in the church, whether in the first century AD or today.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2011

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Week Two: The Message Of The Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

In addressing the spiritual needs of a congregation struggling with many problems and weaknesses, Paul begins by calling them to become one. From the beginning, he addresses them as fully equal to him spiritually, and he does not encourage anyone to become dissatisfied with the others or to consider leaving the congregation. He now continues by emphasizing the importance of developing a new, spiritual perspective that rejects the false wisdom of the world, and that embraces the more godly perspectives and priorities of Jesus Christ.

The message of the cross is simply inconsistent with worldly logic and knowledge (1:18-19). The gospel's teaching that we are all saved by grace refutes the world's false distinction between 'good' and 'bad' persons. The gospel tells us that we are all simply weak sinners, who all depend completely on God's grace. The world's heroes and idols need grace and forgiveness every bit as much as you and I do; and their deeds and accomplishments are just as useless for spiritual salvation as our own meager efforts are. Conversely, you and I need God's forgiveness just as much as Hitler or Genghis Khan or any other notorious villain needs mercy.

God does not expect us to 'like' this teaching, nor does he care whether we 'want it to be true', nor even whether we 'agree with it'. To make sure that we understand this, Paul quotes from Isaiah, where God promises that, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise." Since the beginning of civilization, humans have invented countless philosophies and religions, but they all have one thing in common: they seek ways of salvation, validation, or spiritual satisfaction that rests on our own goodness, knowledge, or effort. This error, not morality or theology, is the fundamental distinction between false human-made religions and the genuine gospel of Jesus.

Paul leaves no doubt that fleshly wisdom has no use in understanding or practicing the gospel (1:20-25). He describes two common viewpoints: the Jews of his day, who evaluated things based on the miraculous or emotional, and the Greeks of his time, who sought truth solely by rational logic. One or both of these also characterize a wide majority of persons today - but neither method leads to an understanding of the gospel. Jesus calls us to accept a new perspective, valuing the eternal over the earthly, and rejoicing in our weakness rather than trying to pretend that we are strong.

Although this principle offends those who think highly of themselves, it encourages the rest of us (1:26-31). The gospel was not meant for the elite, the powerful, or the ambitious. Such persons can, of course, come to accept the gospel - but only if they humble themselves first. The gospel teaches the unimportance of earthly power or privilege, not to fuel resentment against those who have such things, but to cure each of us of our own foolish efforts to seize them for ourselves.

Anyone who has truly grasped the gospel will not crave earthly privilege or power, nor will he or she ever look down on anyone, for any reason. Nor will such a believer resent or hate those who have 'too much' and do not appreciate it. For the gospel reminds us that the things of real, lasting value are freely available to all, without any need for debate, competition, or comparison.

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Week Three: Only Jesus Christ, & Him Crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-16)

Underlying the many problems in the Corinthian church is a lack of spiritual wisdom. So too, in today's church the greatest need is not for new methods or better leaders, but rather for a deeper acceptance of the eternal, spiritual perspective that the gospel teaches. Instead of putting confidence and hope in emotional experiences or human ingenuity, we are called to "know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Even in Paul's own ministry, this was his only source of power and effectiveness (2:1-5). In his epistles, Paul says much about himself that disproves the stereotype of him as fiery and aggressive. He reminds the Corinthians that his fruitful ministry there was entirely without human eloquence or self-confidence. He had no strength except Jesus Christ and him crucified, and he had no message except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It is not especially challenging to commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, since he is undeniably wise, compassionate, and powerful. But we must go further, and commit ourselves to a crucified Savior. Jesus' miracles and resurrection prove that he is God, but they cannot save us. Only the shedding of his blood for our sins gives us salvation. We depend entirely on his blood for the hope of eternal life, just as surely as murderers or dictators have no hope unless they are granted God's unconditional forgiveness.

God by no means rejects wisdom - he merely asks us to seek the right kind (2:6-10). "God's secret wisdom" is not hidden, but it cannot be seen by those who are blinded by the false wisdom of the world. Worldly wisdom seeks either to solve some problem of interest to the flesh, or else it seeks to puff up those who obtain it. Spiritual wisdom seeks to know the truth, regardless of whether the truth is expected, pleasant, or convenient.

The apostle reminds us that the crucifixion of God's Son at the hands of human rulers is simply a typical action of those who consider themselves to be important in this world. But their brand of wisdom comes to nothing - for it cannot, by its nature, find God or find truth. Only those who humble themselves can find spiritual truth. Paul quotes again from Isaiah (verse 9 comes from Isaiah 64:4) to remind us of the immense spiritual blessings that await those who love God more than they love this world.

Spiritual wisdom is freely and equally available to all; it does not need to be paid for and cannot be earned by meritorious action, for it comes only from being with God (2:11-16). The "mind of Christ" has nothing to do with theology or doctrine, but instead comes from understanding the things that mattered to Jesus. These in turn are the things that the Spirit teaches us.

When Jesus Christ lived on this earth, how did he use his great wisdom? He did not acquire power or authority, and he did not use his knowledge to obtain privilege or even comfort for himself. Instead he sought to meet the greatest needs of those around him - not their desires, but their deepest, truest needs. This is now the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will guide us into all truth, by opening our eyes to things that the flesh does not wish us to see.

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Week Four: The Right Foundation (1 Corinthians 3:1-17)

In trying to help the Corinthian Christians to deal with their problems, Paul emphasizes spiritual wisdom over earthly wisdom. They must focus on what matters to God, instead of using their time and abilities to please the flesh. Everything in their lives and ministries needs a better and more secure foundation. The apostle now offers further thoughts on this.

The Corinthians must begin by accepting their spiritual needs (3:1-4). They do not lack information or ability, but they lack spiritual maturity. They have both material and spiritual blessings, but their perspective is thoroughly worldly. Their divisions and quarrels show that they all need to go back to the beginning, to rebuild their understanding and their faith in God.

They must realize the inherent limitations of mortal human beings (3:5-9). None of us can contribute to anyone's salvation or spiritual development except in a very small way. God grants us our ministries as acts of grace to us. God could always do a much better job of preaching, teaching, or serving if he just did so directly through his Spirit, rather than relying on us. It is neither noble nor spiritual to assume that the salvation of others depends entirely on us.

For example, it may seem spiritual or 'motivational' to assume that eternally lost persons could have been saved 'if only a Christian had spoken to them'. But God loves everyone, and he gives everyone an opportunity to come to him. If we choose to pass up our chance to provide that opportunity, then God can find another way. To think that God would just simply stand by in such a situation, more interested in blaming a believer (however selfish or lazy that believer may have been) than in providing another opportunity, reveals a diseased, twisted view of God.

Moreover, we cannot expect that the fruit of building on the right foundation will be found in short-term outward results; we must wait for God to bring everything to light (3:10-17). Because we can adopt fleshly society's craving for quick, easy results (a trait that infects almost every human society and culture, but that is especially prominent in our own), we misunderstand much of what God's Spirit teaches us about ministry and faithfulness.

Many religious groups have results and activities look impressive on the outside, but this is not the crucial test. The Day (when Jesus returns) will bring everything to light; only then can we know for certain whether what we have done has brought an eternal harvest. And this in turn will depend not on excitement or on numbers, but on humility and on gratitude for God's grace.

We should also avoid the temptation to decipher what it means to "escape through the flames". Although this phrase sounds intriguing, it is not the point of the passage to detail what it means. We need only know that it comes from building on a shaky foundation, and that it is bad. If we build on the right foundation, then we'll never have to worry about what it means to escape through the flames. The passage calls us neither to speculate nor to rationalize, but to make certain to build our lives and ministries only on Jesus Christ, and on him crucified.

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Week Five: No More Boasting (1 Corinthians 3:18-4:7)

The numerous problems in the church at Corinth do not come from inferior methods, from a lack of zeal, or from having the wrong leaders. This congregation has fallen into the habit of relying on human wisdom and ingenuity, and thus everything else has been built on this faulty foundation. So, even at those times when things might look all right outwardly, they are not dealing with their real needs. Paul now addresses their habit of boasting, since this is both a symptom of deeper problems and also a source of further spiritual decay.

Christians are easily tempted to judge success or failure by worldly standards (3:18-23). But this world's standards are unreliable - whether they tell us what we want to hear, or whether they condemn us. If we can learn to see God the Father as our only standard of worth and importance, if we can learn to see Jesus Christ as our only standard of speech and behavior, if we can learn to see the Holy Spirit as our only standard of wisdom and truth, then we can avoid the kinds of insecurities that lead to divisions and bickering about human methods and leaders.

Since human judgments count for nothing in God's eyes, if we are to follow Jesus, then we must learn to disregard human opinions and judgments as well (4:1-5). Paul tells us that even his own opinion of himself is suspect! If an apostle does not accept his own conscience as a reliable guide to truth, then we should be willing to acknowledge how fallible our own reasoning can be.

This by no means implies that we should not have beliefs, or that we do not act on them. It means, simply but crucially, that we should remain humble at all times, both before God and before other humans. We ought always to act in accordance with what we understand to be true, to the best of our ability. But we must expect that our understanding will often prove to be inadequate, so that we must always be ready to change. And above all we must not forcefully impose our beliefs on others, no matter how easy it is to rationalize it.

The apostle emphasizes another key implication: the necessity that believers stop competing with one another and comparing themselves with one another (4:6-7). As he says elsewhere, "when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12). It is ingrained in most of us to compare and contrast our financial condition, our education, our physical appearance, and indeed our church congregation, with those of others. But this is instilled by the world; it does not come from God.

Instead we ought to learn to show full appreciation for whatever we have, and learn to use it all in the name of Jesus. It is just as objectionable to look down on a congregation we consider 'weak' as it is to dislike someone because they are less physically appealing. It is just as disturbing to abandon other Christians because they have problems as it is to rob from the poor and give to the rich. We can see this clearly when it applies to secular affairs, so it is just a matter of faith and humility to see that the same principles apply to the gospel.

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Week Six: A Lifestyle Of Humility (1 Corinthians 4:8-21)

The struggles of the ancient Corinthian church remind us that a great many of our problems stem from fleshly human pride. Pride causes us to exalt human leaders and our own worldly logic above the Word of God; pride induces us to indulge in comparisons and competition; pride tempts us to introduce performance standards into the church instead of being motivated by grace. The only antidote to these spiritual ailments is a lifestyle of humility.

Paul calls us to remember the lifestyle of Jesus and those closest to him (4:8-13). He reproaches the Corinthian believers for acting as if they were spiritual 'kings', lording it over one another and taking their blessings for granted. He, an apostle, is living a life of constant sacrifice and risk, instead of claiming privileges for himself. They think they are wise in Christ, because of their false sophistication. But Paul, in being a 'fool for Christ', is following Jesus' own example.

There will always be false preachers who assure us that following Jesus should bring a life of ease or privilege. There will be other deceivers who tell us that being obedient gives us the right to look down on 'sinners'. It is up to each one of us to resist these temptations in our own heart, and to be ready to live in humility and grace, regardless of what other 'believers' say or do.

When we read Paul's wise but challenging words, our flesh may waver between prideful resistance and crushing guilt - but neither of these responses is called for (4:14-17). Guilt motivation has no place in teaching the genuine gospel, yet neither does defensiveness or rationalization. The truth is what it is, and no human can change it.

We are each called to a fearful lifestyle, as we are called to give up the lordship of our own lives to God. No one of us can ever claim to be better, more important, or more spiritual than anyone else. If we want to follow the real Jesus, then we must always be vulnerable, and we also must never play God in the lives of others. We must simply love them, as Paul and Timothy do for the Corinthians - and allow God to teach them, correct them, and - if necessary - to judge them.

Though Paul is not personally coming to us as he was to Corinth, we too will someday find all of our rationalizations and pretenses exposed (4:18-21). Paul has clearly warned the Corinthians earlier about their divisions and their fleshly indulgences, and they have not listened to him. Yet it is not him against whom they are rebelling; it is God. And if they do not understand this and accept it, then it will do no good even if they do correct their outward misbehavior.

The 'whip' that Paul is bringing is not physical punishment, nor does it involve personal authority over the lives of these erring believers. His whip is the truth, for the truth of God is far more fearful - to those who believe - than any human judgment. Paul won't have to yell, and he won't have to threaten. And neither should we. If we need to raise our voices, if we need to pass judgment on others, if we need to use boasting and posturing, then our message is empty. The power to change lives and save souls is in the Word, not in us.

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Week Seven: Destroying The Sinful Nature, Saving The Spirit (1 Corinthians 5)

Paul has detailed how the lack of humility in Corinth has caused so many spiritual ills. He now discusses a specific example. The incident involves only a handful of individuals, yet it is both a symptom of the problems in Corinth and the cause of further spiritual decay. For us too, this passage is often a source of misunderstanding or discouragement.

The apostle expresses disappointment and distress about one of the Corinthian believers who is indulging openly and boastfully about a most flagrant act of immorality (5:1-2). His actions are bad enough (the phrasing suggests that he is having an immoral affair with his step-mother). It is worse that the others are apparently unconcerned, even seeing this as a point of pride and 'sophistication'. Instead, they will need to have love and faithfulness to handle this kind of painful situation within the church, and to do so in a way that shows both grace and truth.

The apostle indicates that they must expel this person from their fellowship until or unless he is willing to turn away from his outrageous behavior (5:3-5). But note carefully the reason for this: it is not punishment, nor is it to 'cleanse the church'; it is instead to meet the spiritual needs of this erring brother. Unless we see this alone as the basis for the drastic act of removing fellowship, then we are certain to make grievous errors in the ways we apply it.

The only justification for withdrawal of fellowship is when it must be done for the sinner's own sake. Sometimes being 'handed over to Satan' - having the loving hand of church fellowship removed, so that a person can see his false worldly 'friends' for what they are - is the only way a person like this will come to his senses and repent of his sin. But we may not chase someone out of the church just because his behavior offends us, or just to avoid dealing with his problems.

Paul corrects their attitudes, and he would probably correct ours too (5:6-9). It is never good to boast, neither about our tolerance nor about our intolerance. It is never good to be judgmental or malicious, regardless of the reason. And we must not be insincere - we must not allow our annoyance or insecurity to lead us to abuse the practice that Paul fearfully recommends here.

Moreover, every believer, not just the leaders, shares in these grave responsibilities (5:9-11). This action should not be taken as a private decision of the leaders, nor may a group of believers take it upon themselves to 'shun' a sinner. It can and must be done only as a decision by the body as a whole, after everyone has taken the time to sober up and put the welfare of others first.

The final point is a reminder of where our responsibility lies (5:12-13). It is cheap and easy to critique the actions of those outside the church. But it does no good to preach about the errors we see in the world around us. And it is cheap and easy to let someone else deal with the painful (and plentiful) human problems inside the church. But if we wish to follow Jesus, we must all share in this community responsibility.

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Week Eight: Do Cheaters Ever Win? (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)

The apostle now addresses yet another spiritual ailment that has afflicted the believers in Corinth. Their members are suing one another in court (even in that era, lawyers and courts routinely exploited human misfortunes and inflamed human differences), and they are not even considering how this looks from the perspective of the gospel.

Paul emphatically denounces their use of law courts to have their cases heard (6:1-6). Nowhere in his comments does he have any interest in who is 'right' or 'wrong' from a legal perspective. This should not matter to those who follow Jesus - the way that believers handle their differences is more important than the details of the differences themselves. It is sad when church controversies and divisions lead believers to harden their hearts and act like pagans, excusing their sin by convincing themselves that they are 'right' and thus are automatically justified.

As difficult as it may be to work out our differences face-to-face, it is the only way that accords with gospel values. The apostle tells the Corinthians to do this even if it means allowing their most insignificant members to act as arbitrators! It is also unimportant whether or not he means this literally, for there is a broader point that outweighs all other considerations.

Often in this life, we must choose between being wronged and aggressively pursuing redress (6:7-8). Within the church, the Scripture is clear: it is better to allow oneself to be wronged or cheated than it is to give in to our urge for revenge. In this world, cheaters often do 'win', in the sense that they get what their flesh desires. As Christians, we have to learn to value our relationship with God above such fleshly concerns.

Any time we struggle with disputes or divisions amongst believers, it is important to remember how much we ourselves need God's grace (6:9-11). We have all been guilty of irresponsible or even sinful behavior that has at one time or another harmed or discouraged others. As in Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (see Matthew 18:23-35), those who have been forgiven of much should not become resentful of others who may 'get away with' something else.

This passage lists a number of types of sinful behavior, but not for us to use these as a weapon. The apostle just wants us all to think about the things we have been forgiven of. Whether or not our personal misdeeds are found among the specific sins listed here, we all should remember that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God . . . but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

As long as the church consists of humans, we are going to be discouraged or frustrated by the behavior of our brothers and sisters. Some of them will become aggressive, and will seek to take over the church for the sake of their own egos. Others will use worldly methods to serve their earthly interests. Such persons will have rationalizations that, to them, feel spiritual. We must not allow them to get the best of us, but must be like Jesus, as difficult as that is in practice. Allow them to enjoy fleshly satisfaction now; because you can enjoy God's presence forever.

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Week Nine: What Do You Mean, No Rules? (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

The apostle has discussed several spiritual problems affecting the church in Corinth, and has given them suggestions for addressing them. Because of this, it could be possible to misinterpret what Paul says, viewing it as a legal code to study in order to pick up details that we too should implement. Indeed, there are many in every era who erroneously see the New Testament books as a collection of commands and rules. Paul now takes steps to correct this misunderstanding.

Followers of Jesus are called to do something more difficult, but more worthwhile, than rule-keeping (6:12). The principle that, "everything is permissible" is frustrating to authoritarians and is misunderstood by libertines; but it is an important principle that we must grasp in order to understand the gospel. There are no rules in Christianity - instead, we must develop a new perspective. Questions and problems are to be handled by an awareness of the true values that Jesus promoted: emphasizing the spiritual over the physical, grace over judgment, and so forth.

We routinely quote Jesus' "greatest commandment" to love God and to love others, yet we refuse to accept its implications. If we learn to love - not fake, pagan love but genuine gospel love - then we don't need rules or commands. We won't need them for worship, because we will desire to edify others rather than to please our own flesh. We won't need them for conduct, since we will never wish to benefit at someone else's expense. We won't need rules to deal with controversies, because we will see fleshly disputes for the trivialities they are, and won't allow our emotions to be drawn into them.

This is a higher standard, not a lower standard, than law (6:13-17). Law always has loopholes and exceptions, and law always attracts lawyers. Law always provides a way to keep arguing and to keep fighting. But the gospel has none of these things. The gospel tells us always to love others as ourselves, always to be humble and forgiving, always to put our hope in heaven and not in this world. Only when we set aside our rules and commands can we see how truly great a calling Jesus has given us.

While the fleshly-minded (Christians and unbelievers alike) concentrate on rules, the apostle approaches subjects like sexual immorality from a far different, more spiritual perspective. Because our hope rests on Jesus' resurrection, our bodies are in effect "members of Christ himself". If we truly believed in and were aware of Jesus' presence, would we even think of engaging in adultery, prostitution, or other such sins? It is not the lack of rules, or even a lack of punishment, that leads to these sins - it is a lack of appreciation of Jesus and his blood.

Although sins of aggression and violence harm others, and do need to be prevented or redressed, there are many sins that harm no one except the one who commits them (6:18-20). When we desire to rant against things that don't even harm us, this should help us to see our own spiritual needs. We should always treat our own bodies as members of Christ, and act accordingly. But as for those who commit sins that disgust us, we should put their need for God first - we should pray for them, and should show them Jesus' grace rather than our irritation.

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Week Ten: Marital Relations (1 Corinthians 7:1-16)

The church in Corinth was having so many spiritual problems that it comes as no surprise to learn that they were also confused about the proper Christian perspective on marriage. Yet with this topic we see a different tone from Paul; for the Corinthians themselves had initiated this discussion, knowing that they needed a better understanding of marriage and related subjects.

The apostle provides them with a basic view of marriage that transcends worldly thinking, including the kind of worldly thinking that is often considered 'religious' (7:1-7). He suggests that the ability to remain contentedly unmarried is a gift, saving uncertainty and concern. Yet for most persons a healthy marriage provides for a mutual meeting of needs.

Paul's perspective gives no support to those who would tolerate physical attraction only as a prelude to childbearing. Human nature is what it is: physical desire - while we have no absolute "right" to fulfill it - is a part of our nature that would be foolish to deny. Paul is wise and realistic in describing how a positive marriage can prevent physical passions from finding their fulfillment in more damaging ways. Though Paul himself has moved beyond such desires, he is a rare exception, and he is sympathetic to those who have not.

The unmarried should ask themselves a key question (7:8-9). Can they avoid the distractions of the opposite sex, in order to concentrate exclusively on ministry, or would finding a spouse relieve them of unfulfilled desires? Paul puts the question this simply, without any moral implications of any kind. It is simply a matter of allowing God to show us which path he has laid out before us. Being married is neither 'better' nor 'worse' than being unmarried - it is just different, in terms of the opportunities and responsibilities that it brings. We humans would save ourselves a lot of trouble if we could accept this simple perspective.

Of course, marriage becomes a more painful topic when one party becomes dissatisfied; and so Paul provides perspective on this, too (7:10-16). The basic principles are again simple, focusing on peace and grace. A believer is responsible for his or her own behavior, not that of a spouse. A Christian should see to it that he or she does not cause a marriage to fail. But if an incompatible spouse - in particular, an unbeliever - insists on leaving, then the Christian's responsibility ends.

Of course, the flesh wants to talk about "what if" and "but that would mean"; but to emphasize these misses the point. The life of a follower of Jesus is based on simple yet challenging principles; we must master these and live them before we have the right to start demanding answers to 'special cases'. Otherwise, we base our teachings on human logic and fleshly emotion, instead of on God's grace and truth.

In discussing his examples, Paul reminds us that we never can know with certainty what someone else will do, or how a certain situation will work out. But we never have to know these things to live as Jesus calls us to live. We just have to know, love, and trust Jesus.

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PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Eleven: Contentment In The Present (1 Corinthians 7:17-40)

As Paul responds to the Corinthian believers' questions about marriage, he develops a perspective that balances spiritual priorities with a realistic view of human nature. This same frame of reference can also be applied to other questions of life. So, as Paul continues to discuss some of the specific inquiries he has received, he also broadens the discussion.

It is a useful general principle that God wants each of us to be content with where we are in life, so that we will focus more of our energy on spiritual matters than on pursuing worldly goals (7:17-24). The worldly constantly try to decide what changes they wish to make to themselves and others, for they believe that happiness and contentment are a matter of finding something new. But God teaches us to seek joy and peace by appreciating the blessings we already have.

This principle can save us a lot of insecurity and envy. Paul is by no means justifying or defending the unfair ways that the world allots its treasures - if anything, he is more aware than we are of the world's injustices. But there are things more important than defending our personal interests. And most of us are fortunate compared with the lower classes of the 1st century - so we have little reason to give in to the selfish ambitions or restlessness that cause so many pagans to devote themselves to earthly rewards instead of living a godly life of humility and service.

Paul further develops his previous thoughts on whether or not a believer ought to get married (7:25-35). He goes out of his way not to make rules, and he avoids promoting a solution that works for everyone. Instead, he establishes a perspective to help us with this question as well as many others. "The time is short", for none of us will live on this planet more than a short time.

As long as we are here, we shall be limited by our earthly, mortal bodies. Yet our true identity transcends the things the worldly value in a human being. Marriage is an earthly institution only ("at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage", Matthew 22:30), and should be kept in that context. Marriage is a blessing from God that meets important earthly needs in those to whom it is given. Yet it is not absolutely essential to earthly life or joy; and there are those whom God has enabled to minister to others in different ways.

The apostle's final examples remind us of the balance between the ideal of spiritual focus and the reality of human nature (7:36-40). His examples involve questions of whether to marry or not to marry, yet his conclusion is of interest in even more general ways: for he says that either decision can be good and constructive, if done for the right reasons. Our decisions should be made in faith and humility - not by satisfying the flesh and then rationalizing it afterwards.

So too, when we must make decisions we ought to set aside the fleshly mentality that leads us to argue and debate secondary issues with one another. It is quite possible that some of the choices we face in life are between two good options, either of which can be blessed by God as long as we have the right perspective and live by faith.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2011

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WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS: PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Week Twelve: Knowledge & Love - In Practice (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Paul now turns to yet another problem that was causing divisions in the church at Corinth. This passage - along with the apostle's discussion of the same issue in Romans 14 - can be very helpful. The specific 'issue' rarely arises today - but for this reason, the apostle's thoughts can help us to consider some important principles, without getting distracted by our emotions and personal preferences. Then, we can apply these principles in areas where we ourselves struggle.

The apostle's perspective is based on the practical difference between knowledge and love (8:1-3). Both are, of course, good in themselves - Paul is by no means saying that one is 'good' and the other is 'bad'. Knowledge, though, has a more limited range of applications. By its nature, knowledge primarily benefits the one possessing it, while love blesses everyone. The person with knowledge can bless others, but only if he or she uses his knowledge with an even larger measure of humility - otherwise knowledge merely puffs up the person who has it. But love - that is, genuine gospel love, not the kind of fake love practiced by the world - can only build up.

Questions about food that had been sacrificed to idols were difficult for the earliest Christians (8:4-6). Large cities had many temples where pagan gods were worshiped; and one common practice was to bring gifts of food for these 'gods' to 'eat'. In actuality, the self-interested leaders of these religions just took these sacrifices for themselves; and when there was more than they needed, they simply sold it in the marketplace. So it was common knowledge that much of the meat bought in public markets had at one time been 'sacrificed' to an idol.

To many believers in Jesus, this made no difference. They knew that pagan gods didn't exist, and they knew that the whole practice was no sillier or more sinful than most other things that happen in the secular world. But other Christians found this very disturbing, and sincerely worried that eating such food might constitute some kind of blasphemy or spiritual disloyalty.

Paul considers the issue itself unimportant, but he considers it all-important to be thoughtful of the weaknesses of others (8:7-8). It is nice if a believer has a clear idea of why it is all right to eat the meat from an idol's temple, just as it is nice today if a believer understands why it is good to abstain from the silly excesses that a lot of denominations consider 'worship'. But it is better, both now and then, to love others enough to seek their good, rather than trying to tell them everything we know. Those who make mistakes in their lifestyle or ministry can benefit much more from a loving example than they can from lectures of why they are in the wrong.

Our freedom in Christ is given to us so that we can glorify God, not so that we can serve our fleshly natures (8:9-13). Paul points out how easy it can be to lead others astray when we value our freedom above their spiritual health. The apostle even says that he would be willing to abstain from meat altogether, if it was the only way to avoid harming others. We should be equally willing to sacrifice our own fleshly indulgences and emotional preferences if they get in the way of showing God's light to others. After all, look how much Jesus gave up for us.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Thirteen: Rights & Responsibilities (1 Corinthians 9:1-18)

After discussing the controversy over meats that had been sacrificed to idols, Paul moves on to some more general applications of the principles involved. The worldly crave as many rights as they can get, and they try to pawn off their responsibilities on others. But the follower of Jesus should pursue an exactly opposite policy. Jesus set us an example of giving up his rights and privileges, while accepting the responsibility to give to others.

Paul is not asking anyone to make sacrifices that he himself has not made (9:1-6). Unlike worldly 'leaders', who rationalize their selfish behavior by claiming that their 'position' requires them to hold special privileges and benefits, Paul follows Jesus' example. Was there any reason why God's only-begotten Son could not have lived a life as a comfortably wealthy aristocrat, or a popular celebrity, rather than as a poor carpenter's son? Was Paul himself required to make so many personal sacrifices and to suffer so many pains for the sake of ministry?

No, these things were not legal requirements, and they were not even moral obligations. But they eliminated stumbling blocks for those who desperately needed God. And there is no law against us having wealth or position - but, contrary to the church's own frequent rationalizations, it is not spiritually beneficial to seek them out. To be like Jesus, we need no money or authority, because genuine gospel ministry is always person-to-person. A true follower of Jesus accepts responsibility to give to others, without seeking wealth or claiming to be 'in charge' of anything.

The greatest benefits and rights are those that come from the gospel itself, not those offered by or valued by the world (9:7-14). Accepting the responsibility of living like Jesus brings its own blessings and its own rights - though they are far different from what the world call 'rights'. We have the right always to tell the truth. We have the right to enjoy the fellowship of others who are following their Savior. We have the right to be served and encouraged, without guilt or obligation, by those others who have accepted the same responsibilities.

Paul resolves to pursue only the true rewards of the gospel (9:15-18). He feels no necessity to claim even those rights that belong to him by nature of his responsibilities. This has nothing to do with asceticism or with self-denial. Paul gladly accepts any and all blessings that God chooses to give him - he is just not going to seek out things that he doesn't have. So too, we are not called to give up what we have, so much as we are called not to worry about getting things we don't have, so that we can focus on helping others with their spiritual needs.

We have all been given enough blessings to realize how much God cares about us. Yet we each have other desires that go unfulfilled. This is not a problem, and it is not an indication that something is wrong. Nor are there any rules about when we are 'allowed' to fulfill our desires. The apostle is simply teaching us that we can always trust God to give us what we really need, so that we are able to focus on the needs of others instead of worrying about our own.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Fourteen: All Things To All Humanity (1 Corinthians 9:19-27)

Paul has presented a perspective on rights and responsibilities that is new to the fleshly world, yet entirely Christ-like. He now discusses further implications. Through the centuries, believers have misunderstood the apostle's teaching to be "all things to all men", while some have distorted its context and turned it into a license for spineless surrender to worldly values, rather than the call to humility that it actually is.

Paul emphasizes the importance of freedom in Christ, yet he voluntarily makes himself a servant to everyone (9:19). He willing to serve and sacrifice not only in the flesh, but also in his mind. He stands willing to question any of his own opinions and beliefs, to put aside his own traditions and habits, if it helps someone to listen to the gospel without distractions.

Many believers get this backwards. In order to justify our personal beliefs, habits, and attitudes, we think that we should search for a way to give them God's stamp of approval. But this does not sanctify them - it simply demeans God's will and purposes to use him to justify our own fleshly impulses. There is nothing wrong with our earthly loyalties, practices, and involvements, as long as we accept them as such, and stand ready to sacrifice them - usually just temporarily - if they ever get in the way of something of genuine spiritual importance.

In this context, Paul discusses becoming a Jew to the Jews, becoming weak to the weak, and so forth (9:20-23). This has nothing to do with adopting others' habits and lifestyles to make them feel more 'comfortable' with the gospel. It means, rather, that Paul is ready to give up his own opinions, and is ready to make himself uncomfortable, in order not to make it hard for others to listen to the gospel. We cannot make the genuine gospel 'appealing' to the flesh. We can only avoid adding in our own human beliefs and opinions, which just confuse matters.

Paul was a lifelong practitioner of traditional Jewish practices - but when he was among the Gentiles, he did not make these a priority or an issue. Likewise, when he was with the Jews, he did not distract them by thinking like a Gentile or expecting them to do so. Some commentators like to emphasize how Paul did follow some of the traditional Jewish practices when he was in Jerusalem, but this misses the point. It is not about fitting in; it is about avoiding distractions. It is not really about what we do, or not do, at all - it is about perspective, attitude, and priorities.

This change of perspective brings the added responsibilities that always accompany true spiritual freedom (9:24-27). These verses make it clear that being "all things to all men" is not a license, but a serious responsibility. By comparing himself to a competitor in an athletic event, Paul reminds us that personal sacrifice and effort is inherent in anything worthwhile. In Jesus, our sacrifices and efforts are not necessary for salvation - in fact, they are not required at all; if we simply refuse to give up our opinions and traditions, then God won't 'punish' us. Rather, our sacrifices are expressions of our trust in Jesus and our love for his people. We are rewarded for them by strengthened spiritual health and by knowing that our humility brings joy to God.

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WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS: PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Week Fifteen: Examples From The Past (1 Corinthians 10:1-13)

The gospel calls us to view our rights and responsibilities in a way that differs greatly from the world's perspective. Using examples from long before the coming of Jesus, Paul shows that the same principles are seen even in these distant times. Now that all has been fulfilled, we see a complete picture - this does not give us special privileges; it gives us weightier responsibilities.

We do not often associate the Exodus from Egypt with Jesus, yet Paul points out some significant parallels (10:1-5). The Red Sea crossing was a sort of baptism: they had faith in divine power, and were "baptized into Moses" - that is, they were immersed in the Law. We are baptized into Christ - into grace. This is a greater blessing, and it carries greater responsibilities.

Jesus, too, was with the Israelites - not literally, but in the sense that God's grace allowed them to live in his presence, just as Jesus' blood allows us to be with him. Yet the apostle also warns that those great blessings were not enough to keep the people faithful. Of the huge group that left Egypt with such joy and excitement, only a tiny remnant saw the Promised Land. The same can happen to us when we focus more on material objects or outward behavior than on God's grace and compassion. Legalists and libertines are both in error - the gospel is not about earthly things.

In Moses' era, sin had severe consequences (10:6-10). The faithlessness, fleshly indulgence, and complaining of the Israelites brought drastic punishments. God showed them extraordinary grace, time after time, but there were occasions on which he withdrew his gracious protection and exposed them to painful discipline. Now in Christ, he works differently (and those who think that today's disasters are caused by some specific sin are badly misguided).

Instead, our sin and selfishness are punished spiritually, by pushing our souls farther from God's presence. God does not push us away from him, but our misdeeds and ungodly attitudes push him away. To the discerning, this is a greater motivation to avoid sin than any fleshly punishment would be. To the fleshly, whose minds are far from God's presence anyway, there is no additional motivation except for God's desire that they see what they are missing in him.

As those who have been released from the law, and who know the good news of Jesus, we can draw even more wisdom from this ancient episode (10:11). Notice how the apostle continues to reason with the bungling Corinthian believers. He never resorts to law-making, but rather he continues to explain things in terms of spiritual principles. God has never been pleased with forced obedience, but until Jesus' ministry of grace he could not always show this. But "for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come", God shows extraordinary graciousness, by so patiently waiting for us to seek him willingly, not out of fear or guilt.

Only those who misunderstand grace interpret it as a license (10:12-13). There are no rules in Christ, but there are many enticing things we should avoid. There are no legal requirements, but we have no good reason not to serve God with all our hearts. In his compassion, God enables us at all times to live as he calls us to. But we ourselves must make the decision to do so.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Sixteen: Everything Is The Lord's (1 Corinthians 10:14-11:2)

The apostle has patiently discussed the many spiritual problems in Corinth, teaching them principles to help them overcome their divisions and fleshly behavior. His next discussion concerns loyalty. The most powerful reasons for living as God calls us do not involve reward or punishment. The best reasons to heed God's words are based on our relationship with him.

Whether we realize it or not, we all face a basic choice to follow Jesus or to worship idols (10:14-17). Everyone does one or the other, even those who consider themselves to be atheists or agnostics. Our words, attitudes, and behavior always give away the things we worship and serve. We do not need to feel bad about this - we merely need to acknowledge our tendency to worship and serve other things, so that we can humbly allow God to keep us faithful.

To become the body of Christ, "we who are many" must each decide in our hearts to place our love for God and Jesus above all earthly loyalties and allegiances. The reason why there were so many divisions in the church at Corinth is the same reason why there are so many divisions in the church today. When everyone tries to drag their political or national or cultural or family loyalties into the church, then there isn't any way for us to become one in Jesus. When we come to understand the gospel, then we learn to see how vain and foolish all other loyalties are.

In choosing between God and idols, trying to have it both ways displeases God (10:18-22). Though idols are not truly gods, we still must acknowledge and fight our tendency to worship them. "You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons." God created us to be with him. To prefer the company of idols is to fight against our own true nature.

In practical terms, "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial" (10:23-30). This one idea is wiser and more profound than all of our moralizing, all of our rationalizations, and all of our ridiculous debates over methods, rules, and leaders in the church. It is a principle that challenges every believer to leave behind his or her selfish and fleshly ways of thinking.

The gospel refutes all schools of human reasoning. It tells legalistic 'conservatives' that there are no rules - it is neither acceptable nor possible for us to make up laws or 'standards' for other believers. It tells permissive 'liberals' that something can be 'allowed', and can make them feel good, yet still be spiritually damaging - no amount of human logic, and no number of Scriptures pulled out of context, can change this. The principle that, "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial" ends all our foolish debates, and calls each of us to become a spiritual adult who neither bosses others around nor makes excuses for our mistakes and fleshly desires.

There are some further implications of this (10:31-11:2). We are here to bring glory to God, and God is not glorified by our self-interested arguments or our self-serving accomplishments. He is glorified by our humility and our patient faithfulness to his grace, love, and truth. Paul calls us not to imitate even him personally, but merely to notice the ways that he and others can show us how it is possible to live in the kind of faithful humility that brings glory and joy to God.

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WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS: PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Week Seventeen: Male & Female He Created Them (1 Corinthians 11:3-16)

The Christians in Corinth were struggling with many things in their lives and ministries, so it is no surprise that Paul also has to help them to develop more godly perspectives on the two sexes. Indeed, this can be a challenge even for the most devoted followers of Jesus. Our human insecurities and physical desires combine to throw our minds into a daze, making us vulnerable to the world's many lies and false teachings on the subject.

This is shown by the ways that the apostle's simple recommendation for worship has generated so much pointless debate and so many erroneous interpretations (11:3-7). Paul has just told the Corinthian believers that, "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial"; so his instructions about women 'covering their heads' during worship has nothing to do with rules. Instead, he is making a simple and vital point: God deliberately created males and females, and thus males should act like males, and females should act like females.

This principle has nothing to do with the ridiculous male/female stereotypes that we see in the pagan world. It is neither a justification of troglodyte male dominance nor a support for self-styled pseudo-feminists who merely desire to do the dominating themselves. As with everything in the gospel, it challenges every one of us (not only those who 'disagree' with us) to give up our human logic and fleshly desires, so that we can become what God created us to be.

Like all humanity, males and females share a never-ending inter-dependence (11:8-11). There is nothing wrong with being different: there is nothing wrong with communicating in different ways, and nothing wrong with having different needs and desires. If we didn't fight against this so much, then we might be able to see the reasons why God created us this way. We should not need advanced psychology or biology to realize that we were created to be helpers, not rivals.

Remembering that God created us all - and that he loves us all equally - ought to make us humbly grateful, so that we should not mind giving up a little of our fleshly freedom (11:12-16). In saying this, Paul also clears up any mystery about the 'covering' that he asks women to wear - he is simply saying that a humble, modest woman ought to have hair long enough to identify her as such. That's all - and even this is explained in part by knowing that prostitutes and other questionable women in Corinth used to advertise themselves as such by keeping their hair short.

God did us a favor when, "male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27 and 5:2) - indeed, it is only by his grace and compassion that we have life at all. Yet, instead of being humbled, we want to debate passages involving males and females in self-interested, fleshly terms. There are no 'rules' - and yes, many persons will use this for their selfish advantage. Do we only wish to please God if everyone else is forced to do so as well? We should simply be what God created us to be, and should not worry or fuss over those who prefer to be self-centered instead. If we really believe in God, then we should simply pray for them and let God attend to them.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Eighteen: Proclaiming The Lord's Death Until He Comes (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

Throughout the epistle, Paul has tried to help the Corinthians to move beyond worldly ways of thinking. Most recently, he has tried to help them think more spiritually about the differences between males and females, by reminding them that these differences came about by God's will. Now, he wants them to stop abusing the Lord's Supper, and again he will help them do so by reminding them of where it came from.

At present, the Corinthians are observing the Lord's Supper in a fleshly and harmful manner (11:17-22). They have been looking at it as if it were primarily a meal, instead of as a memorial to Jesus' last days. Now, we know from church history that the early Christians had regular fellowship feasts, and when these were held in a spirit of giving, they could be a blessing to all of those present. But the Corinthians - as have others through the years - have confused the two practices. They have not only turned the memorial observance of the Lord's Supper into a stomach-satisfying meal, but have also begun to behave in a selfish manner at these meals.

Rather than dwelling at length on their errors, Paul simply reminds them that the observance of the Supper originated on the night that Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and killed (11:23-26). In doing so, he brings them back to the main point, and he also reminds us of the folly of most of the present-day debates about the Lord's Supper. His emphasis is that, "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

That's the most important - perhaps the only truly important - principle to remember about the Lord's Supper. Do we or do we not "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"? It is childish to worry or to debate about the mechanics of the Lord's Supper, or the details of the symbols we use. Likewise, it is irrelevant whether we find the Lord's Supper to be 'enjoyable', or even whether it makes us feel 'religious'. The emphasis should not be on us, nor should it be on the actions or the objects involved. The emphasis should be on the Lord's death and its significance.

As an apostle, Paul certainly could have laid down rules for the Lord's Supper observance, but he declines to - instead, he discusses only the attitude a believer should have when observing the Supper (11:27-34). Because the Supper calls us to commemorate such a vital event, we may become spiritually ill if we fail to recognize its significance. Yet this too is something between an individual believer and God - it cannot be regulated or enforced by rules.

We are called to examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper. It is not important to fuss or analyze the procedures or externals of the Supper, but it is crucial that we acknowledge our need for Jesus' death and the amazing grace that his blood supplies. If we do not, then there is no church punishment prescribed; nor is one needed, for such a person "eats and drinks judgment on himself." Paul offers no other incentive, for none could be as severe as this. As with so many of the other areas Paul has addressed in the epistle, the Lord's Supper should not be used as an occasion for judging others, but rather for humbling ourselves before God.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Nineteen: The Spirit & His Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

Although the Christians in Corinth were struggling spiritually, God still blessed them with a great variety of spiritual gifts and other blessings. Like us, unfortunately, the Corinthians interpreted these gifts as a sign of God's special favor, rather than as an outpouring of his grace upon unworthy recipients. Because they took fleshly pride in their gifts instead of being humbly grateful for them, they misused the abilities God gave them. So too, if we do not develop a more humble attitude towards our own blessings, then we too shall misuse the things God gives us.

Paul has a rather curious way of raising this topic (12:1-3), talking about idols and cursing. But his point is simply that the Holy Spirit is best understood not as a doctrine, but in terms of relationships. The believers in Corinth had once been idolaters, and in many cases had demonstrated a loyalty and 'faithfulness' to these gods, even though they didn't exist.

Now that they are believers in Jesus, their relationship with God should guide them into a better understanding of themselves and others. In particular, we are all made one in Jesus through the Spirit, so that competition and rivalry are out of place. And so any understanding of spiritual gifts that leads to feelings of superiority or inferiority is automatically erroneous. Spiritual gifts are always a sign of grace, never a sign of approval or favor.

And so the apostle again emphasizes that there is only one possible source of, and reason for, spiritual gifts of any kind (12:4-6). Any truly worthwhile gift or blessing can only come from God. Christianity makes worldly talents and blessings meaningless - the only true value of any gift or ability comes from the ways that it helps others. Since spiritual qualities come by grace, we have no reason to consider any believer as 'more spiritual' or more important than another. The worldly approach, of giving rewards and privileges to those with certain talents or skills, has no place at all in gospel ministry.

Once we have this perspective, it cannot help but humble us. The distinctions that the world emphasizes mean nothing in Christ. The world arbitrarily rewards some persons for their natural qualities, and it arbitrarily disadvantages others. The church must learn not to do the same. Everyone in Christ has something to offer, everyone in Christ is equally in need of God's grace, and everyone in Christ is equally dependent on God for everything that matters.

Paul next provides just a brief sampling of the many abilities that the Spirit may grant to a believer (12:7-11). This list is not intended to be complete, nor is it meant to be analyzed forensically, as if it were some kind of guide to ministry. He simply wants us to realize how many different ways God and his Spirit might enable one of us to help others.

We should not be bothered when we notice that others have different strengths and weaknesses. And we should never view some of these strengths as being more important to God than others. Human variety, human vulnerability, and human inadequacy should always simply remind us of our need to rely completely on God's wisdom, Jesus' grace, and the Spirit's guidance.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
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Week Twenty: You Are The Body Of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

Many of the problems in the church at Corinth come down to a lack of proper perspective. The Corinthian believers are mistreating, neglecting, and competing with each other because they do not appreciate the way that Jesus wants his followers to become one. And so Paul discusses this in great detail, using the analogy of the human body to describe the degree of closeness and cooperation that God wants believers in Jesus to have.

Although this is a simple analogy, it is also powerful and challenging (12:12-13). To God, the entire body of Christ is one. It comes together in spite of all the natural differences between us, and in spite of our natural strengths and weaknesses. Now, to be a true body, the church cannot be brought together by force. It is a sad abuse of the gospel whenever authoritarian church leaders insist that others follow their way of doing things, in the name of a perverse kind of 'unity'. Real unity, the kind of unity that pleases God, can only be voluntary.

We can appreciate this by imagining what our own bodies would be like without it (12:14-20). Our feet, hands, eyes, and ears are one by nature, not by command. We do not have to reason with our body parts in order to get them to function properly, and we would not want to have to threaten them. The New Testament view of unity challenges the flesh in two major respects.

No body part can ever withdraw voluntarily from the body. The gospel does not recognize a means of following Jesus as an "independent study"; we must do so together. This is not by rule, but by nature - if we do not accept the need for interaction with other believers, then we have not understood even the basics of the gospel, and we shall always misunderstand it.

Yet this kind of unity also rules out any use of force or coercion. It is not acceptable to force methods on the rest of the body, and it is not acceptable to force doctrines on the rest of the body. Yes, indeed, this allows recalcitrant believers to misbehave without fear of human punishment - that doesn't matter, because it still must be that way if we wish to follow Jesus instead of practicing human-made religion. Conformity and unity are two very different things, and Jesus has called for the latter.

This also gives us a perspective on the other 'parts', especially those we do not always appreciate (12:21-26). It does not matter whether another part plays a role we think is worthy of special praise, or whether we think another part is "not presentable", for they are all treasured by Jesus.

"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it." It is easy for us to be so burdened by our own troubles that we don't even wish to listen to the problems of others. But this produces nothing good. We don't need to have all the solutions - just listen, care, and pray. "If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." Why shouldn't we? If we really are all one, then the praise given to a brother or sister is really praise of us as well. These simple ideas alone can alleviate some of the thorniest problems with our relationships, and this way of living pleases Jesus.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2011

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

Week Twenty-One: The Greatest Of These (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

In this chapter of 1 Corinthians, we find some of the New Testament's most-quoted verses. Its teachings about love are used in many different contexts. Yet this in itself emphasizes the need to take a new look at this passage, because its teachings transcend the trivial applications we often make of them. The New Testament's idea of love is one that humbles us all.

Paul first emphasizes the distinction between love and outward accomplishments (13:1-3). Even the most impressive spiritual achievements - dramatic sacrifices, impressive knowledge, or remarkable talents - do not equate with love. We usually like this, since most of us can never expect to attain the kinds of distinctions that the apostle describes. Yet in a different way, this passage challenges every one of us to re-examine our views of love.

Our own outward actions are also not the true way that we show love. If, as Paul has said, even giving all that one has to the poor does not in itself constitute love, then how much more should we realize that our own actions, however righteous, do not substitute for love. Parents can give their children everything they need, yet still not love as Jesus calls them to love. Church leaders can devote many hours and resources to ministry, yet still not truly love as God has called them to. We cannot measure love by these things alone.

The nature of gospel love is measured differently, as the apostle's famous description reminds us (13:4-7). Gospel love lies in putting the interests of others first in our hearts, even in ways that will never be noticed outwardly. To be truly patient and forbearing, we must not remind others of what we endure for them. In other words, those whom we love in this way might never realize just what we have done in our hearts for them.

Moreover, genuine love must include these qualities always, not just when it is easy. And since we are called to love all of humanity, we must practice mercy, patience, generosity, and truthfulness with everyone, not only those who are kind to us. The real test of love is not to do things for those who will appreciate them, and it is not in the ways we treat those who love us. It lies in our attitudes and words towards those who most offend us, frighten us, or anger us.

Unlike the outward things that we value, love will never disappear or lose its value (13:8-12). Every material possession, every personal talent (whether spiritual or secular), every earthly distinction, will disappear. The things that humans fight for, argue about, lie and cheat in order to get - all such things will lose their meaning the moment that our physical bodies die.

Even in this world, these things usually have real value only for a short time. They are never as fulfilling as we expect them to be, and so we always desire more. But our love for one another and our love for God - if they are genuine - not only can survive every earthly test, but can even survive physical death, to last for eternity.

The things that really matter in Christianity come down to a few key values (13:13). Faith, hope, and love are always more valuable than performance, morality, wealth, or popularity. And love is indeed the most valuable and durable of them all.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
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Week Twenty-Two: Spiritual Gifts & Spiritual Maturity (1 Corinthians 14:1-25)

The Corinthian Christians were blessed with a wide assortment of spiritual gifts, yet they used them selfishly. Like many Christians today, they erroneously saw their gifts as a sign of personal spiritual growth, whereas in reality they had (and we have) these gifts by grace alone. Many persons were, and are, spiritually gifted and yet spiritually immature at the same time. Thus the apostle calls them to set aside their childish pre-occupation with which gifts they had, so that they can learn to use them more wisely and selflessly.

Regardless of the specific spiritual gifts involved, the principles for using them are the same (14:1-5). The first principle is to use everything selflessly, solely for the benefit of others. To call attention to one's gifts for its own sake is as immature in the church as it would be in the secular world. And to display one's abilities ostentatiously, with the excuse that this self-indulgent behavior 'encourages' others, is just as bad.

Many Corinthians had been given the miraculous ability to speak in languages that they had never studied. Although this was a potential blessing to others, they were more interested in making sure that everyone knew they could do this. Thus no one was edified. Paul makes it clear that when this gift serves no practical purpose, it should not even be made known. Of course, in today's religious world, there are groups who possess more-or-less imaginary 'gifts' that they use to 'prove' God's favor. But this is not relevant to our own ministry - instead of fussing about other groups, we need to have more humility and selflessness about our own gifts.

The apostle bluntly teaches them to use their spiritual gifts only when they will directly benefit someone else (14:6-17). "Try to excel in gifts that build up the church." The church is just as vulnerable as any other institution to those who want to use it to build power or even wealth for themselves. We cannot do anything about this, but we can keep our own hearts pure. Since the church consists of humans, it will have many problems. We cannot change this, but we can keep using what we have to give to others, instead of bemoaning what others aren't doing.

Hoping that they will see things on a broader level, Paul also helps them to see God's intentions in blessing them with these abilities (14:18-25). His statement, "I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue (language)" should make us pause to reflect. It does, of course, point out the childish nature of the games that some religious groups play with spiritual gifts. But let us take the planks out of our own eyes first.

We can be just as bad as the pagans in valuing the flashy and dramatic over the loving and gentle. The encouraging word when it is needed, the cup of water to the thirsty, the unseen prayer for the discouraged - these things have always mattered to Jesus. They should matter to us, too - and such things truly are spiritual gifts. We ought simply to ignore the noise and boasting of those who misuse what God has given them, and instead devote ourselves to the numerous ways that we can bring small but precious spiritual blessings into the lives of others.

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WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS: PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Week Twenty-Three: For The Strengthening Of The Church (1 Corinthians 14:26-40)

The Christians in Corinth were blessed with an abundance of spiritual gifts, but they were using them in a self-centered and spiritually immature manner. We too are blessed with spiritual qualities, material wealth, and personal talent; yet we often use them to serve ourselves or to draw attention to ourselves, instead of strengthening those who need help. For this reason, Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians have much to say to us too.

When God gives us something, we must be humble enough to use it for others, not for ourselves (14:26-28). Whether it is a miraculous gift, as some of the Corinthians had been given, or whether it is something familiar such as personality or knowledge, such blessings are not given us so that we can feel superior, or even so that we can 'glorify God' by showing them off. They are to serve others, and when not usable for that purpose, should be kept hidden.

Just like the Corinthians, we are often too eager to 'share' our personal ideas and opinions; but God wants us all to slow down and let his words rise above human voices (14:29-33). This is the point of Paul's directives on how those with the gift of prophecy should use it. No one person can or should be expected to be God's sole spokesman. These too are not 'rules', but merely an admonition that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

It does no good to have a congregation full of persons each spouting off opinions about things. This kind of debate may thrill the flesh, but it is not godly. Naturally, it will always be a challenge to find a good balance, since God has called us to teach and encourage one another. Yet this balance is hard to find, and if we must risk going to an extreme, let it be towards the extreme of fewer human words and more of God's Word, less talking and more humility.

We are actually called to ignore those who repeatedly push forward their own methods or views (14:34-38). The original passage does refer specifically to women who do so, because this was a persistent problem in the church of Corinth. The general principle, though, ought to be applied to us all. There is nothing admirable or godly about blurting out our suggestions and opinions about everything - and it is just as ungodly for males to do this as it is for females.

Although secular society glorifies those who love to air their worldly opinions, it cannot contribute to spiritual wisdom, much less to humility. As Paul wrote elsewhere of disputable matters of all kinds, "whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (Romans 14:22). God's Word did not originate with us any more than it did with the Corinthians. All of our human logic and human opinions are mere intellectual debris compared with the wisdom of God's Word, which no one owns or can master.

The apostle then reiterates the necessity for worship to be done selflessly, if we want it to please God (14:39-40). Fleshly expectations of any kind are inappropriate in worship. Believers have entire discussions about 'worship' that are little more than lobbying for things that would make their own flesh feel good or feel 'religious'. Genuine worship can indeed take many different forms, but only if it is done with selflessness and humility above all.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
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Week Twenty-Four: Of First Importance (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

The Corinthian church was full of problems, and Paul has advised them on the most important ones. But gospel ministry is not merely an exercise in fixing problems and making things run smoothly. If ministry is to be meaningful, then it must come from a perspective that puts the cross and the resurrection at the forefront of everything we think and do.

Indeed, unless we continually remember the cross and the empty tomb, then everything else is in vain (15:1-2). The things of genuine "first importance" are few, and none of them have to do with our own actions or doctrines. Everything of "first importance" concerns Jesus himself. This completely reverses our usual perspective - humans invariably try to determine what is 'most important' of the things we do and the doctrines believe; but this just leads us astray.

Even amongst the many things that Jesus did and taught, Paul selects only a handful as being of "first importance": his death, burial, and resurrection. He goes into detail about Jesus' appearances after the resurrection, for these have the effect of validating or confirming the rest of the gospel basics. If the Corinthians want to get past their current struggles, then the best way to do so is to focus more fully on emphasizing these essential things about Jesus.

The basic truths of the gospel will always boggle the earthly mind and frighten the fleshly body (15:3-8). It is simply a waste of time to try to "prove" the gospel by forensic means alone, for it was never meant to appeal to the intellect. The truths of the gospel appeal to the needs of the soul: God's Son showed his understanding of our deepest needs by allowing his blood to be shed to wash away our sins; then he rose from the dead and demonstrated the futility of trying to know God by science and logic alone.

In rising from the dead, Jesus backed up with power the deeper spiritual truths of the gospel. He appeared to a wide assortment of witnesses, including some who, like Saul, did not previously believe in him. But Jesus also calls us to combine his credibility with our faith. Neither he nor his Father ever intended for faith to be reduced to a logical exercise, because even the most basic facts of the gospel cannot be reconciled with purely earthly logic. We never need to apologize for this - it is God, not a church or a human panel of experts, who gave us the gospel.

The mere basics of the gospel are enough to humble Paul completely, since they form a constant reminder of his utter dependence on God's grace (15:9-11). His realization will be ours, too, if we understand what the gospel really teaches. Human-made religion makes the flesh feel good - some religions make the flesh feel excited, some make the flesh feel superior, while others simply make the flesh feel 'religious'. But the gospel does none of these - it humbles the flesh and nourishes the soul. If we seek a fleshly feeling, then we are missing the point of the gospel.

This explains Paul's response when the gospel revealed the needs of his soul. He gave up everything for the gospel, devoting himself to proclaiming it and to serving others so that they might believe it. He worked harder than anyone, because he was more humbled than anyone.

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Week Twenty-Five: Resurrection & Re-Focus (1 Corinthians 15:12-34)

The Corinthian Christians had gone astray in many ways, and Paul has not hesitated to explain this to them. But he does not want them now to run around in frantic guilt, trying to 'fix' things all at once. Instead, he wants them to re-focus. And there is no better way to re-focus a worldly mind than to study and to meditate upon the implications of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The entire gospel stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection (15:12-19). If Jesus was not truly raised from the dead, then the gospel is just a lie. Jesus himself never left any room for others to classify him as a mere philosopher or teacher. He overtly claimed to be God's Son, and he openly spoke of his death and resurrection. Too often, we try to have things both ways by convincing ourselves that Christianity can maximize our happiness and success in this world.

Paul flatly contradicts any such nonsense: "if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." Jesus gave up all of the opportunities for success and popularity that he could have had in this world, and instead poured out his life in service and sacrifice. He did this so that we would understand what really matters.

The unfortunate fact that everyone from politicians to athletes uses the gospel to promote earthly purposes only reflects on their lack of understanding, not on the real purpose of the gospel. Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead to meet the needs of our souls and spirits, not to fulfill the desires of the flesh. If what we proclaim as "gospel" does not contradict the laws of science, if it does not render irrelevant the powers of this earth, then our "gospel" is false and useless.

But the resurrection is true, and this has powerful implications (15:20-28). While the gospel loses its power if used for mere earthly goals, it has overwhelming power when we understand it properly. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we know that we shall live forever. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we know that there is a spiritual, eternal realm far vaster and more important than our earth. Our earthly ambitions are put in a much different perspective.

The apostle re-emphasizes that the gospel of Jesus is absurd unless the resurrection is really true (15:29-34). If there is no life after death, then pure self-interest is the only rational way of living. The world's philosophers have long sought to devise theories to explain this away. But their answers provide false comfort, for they cannot get past the mortality of the fleshly body.

Many commentators on this passage analyze the side issues. What kind of "wild beasts" did Paul fight in Ephesus? (We don't know.) What does it mean to "baptize for the dead"? (We don't know - Paul isn't approving the practice anyway.) When faced with stark reminders of spiritual truths, we all would prefer to debate some safe side issue that cannot threaten us.

But we are mortal beings, and each of us someday will die, whether we live in denial of this or not. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then death will truly be the end. But if he was raised from the dead, then physical death can bring great spiritual hope instead.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
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Week Twenty-Six: Raised Imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:35-58)

Although Paul has offered the Corinthians inspired wisdom for addressing their spiritual problems, he has above all called them to refocus their perspectives and priorities. This in turn involves above all the realization that the cross and the resurrection are truly real, and that our ministry and worship must revolve around these, not human methods, doctrines, or activities.

The apostle dismisses any idle speculation about the form that we shall take when God raises us from the dead (15:35-41). To concoct theories about what our bodies will be like, or to pose debating questions about the form we shall have, would simply reveal an unwillingness to accept the real lessons of the resurrection. Only God, the Creator of all things, has a true understanding of the nature of physical matter and the nature of spiritual reality.

This is the point of Paul's discussion of the varieties of flesh and the varieties of splendor (or glory). The natural world is full of mysteries that even scientists do not really understand, and thus the spiritual realm (or whatever name we give to the dimension or location where God lives) is even farther beyond what we can understand. Idle speculation should be replaced by spiritual hope, as we slowly realize that something much better than this earth awaits the faithful.

The crucial point of the resurrection of the dead is that someday we shall take on a permanent, imperishable form, instead of our present fallible, perishable bodies (15:42-49). No matter how strong or healthy we are in earthly terms, we are forever limited not only by our personal mortality, but by the perishable nature of the earth itself. The world's honors and rewards cannot last, by their very nature. It is the merest self-deceit to try to convince ourselves otherwise.

Because our current bodies are only temporary, mere tents in a foreign land, we can anticipate a great transformation that will defeat death itself (15:50-54). We have no idea about the details of this transformation - and we do not need to know them. God will bring about the transformation, so we do not need to know what will happen or "what to do". We need only remain in Jesus, so that his blood cleanses us of all sin and makes it possible for his Father to transform us into new bodies that can live forever in his presence.

When we understand the victory of the resurrection, it helps us to persevere through this world's ills (15:55-58). Paul quotes from Hosea - a prophet who knew a good deal about suffering - as he rejoices at the mere thought of death one day being defeated once for all. Sin and death are unholy partners, warring against both our bodies and our souls. Sin and death force us into fleshly perspectives and priorities, putting us in a prison from which only Christ can release us.

But we can only experience this victory if we also accept the rest of the gospel. We can only enjoy the relief of spiritual hope if we accept the reality of our spiritual need. We cannot win this wonderful victory through intelligence or righteous living, but only through humbly allowing the blood of the Messiah Jesus to flow over us, cleansing us in spite of ourselves. This same humility then provides us with a lasting and sincere motivation to stand firm, and to endure whatever this life has to offer.

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**WISDOM & FOOLISHNESS:
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Week Twenty-Seven: Supporting One Another (1 Corinthians 16)

The epistle concludes with a series of exhortations with a common theme. The apostle has often reminded the Corinthians to support one another; and Paul now develops this idea on a broader scale. An awareness of the truth of the gospel, and a focus on Jesus' death and resurrection, should both convince us that no one group of believers constitutes all of Jesus' church. There will always be many others ministering and worshipping too.

One simple implication of this is the responsibility to provide for the needs of others when we can (16:1-4). This passage is often used as an example of weekly giving, and it can be useful as long as we also understand its context and purpose. Giving, like everything else in the gospel, must be done voluntarily - not as a rule or a method - if it is to please God.

We can learn much from this example of giving - but only if we resist the temptation to make rules or implement methods. We should ignore the silly debates about "tithing" and percentages, and look instead at the purpose for giving and the attitudes behind it. We can start with a simple perusal of the New Testament examples of giving, to see the kinds of things the early Christians supported financially. But we should also go deeper than this.

Spiritual giving calls us to examine what we have, and where it comes from. It calls us to notice that God could easily finance any worthwhile project all by himself, without the fuss or delay involved in dealing with humans. Therefore, giving is not merely for the sake of the good things that are done with our money. To make a regular financial sacrifice, however small it may seem, is an important part of our own spiritual well-being.

The apostle himself is conscious of his responsibilities to others and his dependence on others (16:5-9). He has encountered many persons in dire need of help; and he has often been helped and served himself. Today we may need help; tomorrow we may be called on to help others. The interdependence of humanity never changes - instead of classifying everyone into haves and have-nots, we should instead always be ready to give generously when we can, and always be ready to receive graciously when others give to us.

Paul gives some further examples of mutual support and interdependence (16:10-18). Timothy, Apollos, Stephanus, and the others are simple reminders that, no matter what may be going on in our own lives, there are always countless others out there serving and being served. Our own part in all this may seem minor, but it is precious to God, even if no one else notices - and who knows what unexpected significance our own small acts might have on occasion?

The closing personal greetings have a similar purpose (16:19-24). Paul never forgets that all around the world there are believers striving to live faithfully, and unbelievers in desperate need of God's light and truth. This is not a question of obligation or guilt, but of simple perspective. This is a huge world filled with souls - if we can just remember this, and try to make our perspectives just a little more like Jesus', then we can be a blessing to others, and we can also appreciate our own blessings a little more.

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