

A Study of 1 Corinthians

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Chapter 1

Divided by the Wisdom of the World

Believers Have a Special Relationship with God through Christ

Verse 1—Paul introduces Himself. He is *called* as an *apostle of Jesus Christ*.

- One cannot just decide to be an apostle but must be appointed by Christ.
- This calling was *by the will of God* as a desire and decision of God.
- So from the onset, it's clear that, delegated by God, the Apostle Paul speaks and writes.

His ministry is of divine origin

Sosthenes our brother may be well known to the Corinthian believers.

- In Acts 18:12-17, a Sosthenes is *the leader of the synagogue* in the city, who apparently became a believer.
- He may be used by Paul to authenticate his ministry among them.

Verse 2—The recipients of this letter

- *the church of God, which is at Corinth* (a good definition of the church)
- Here are four ways to label believers:
 1. *The church* combines two words meaning “to call” or “summon out of”
 2. *Sanctified in Christ Jesus*, having been set apart by God for His use
 3. *Saints by calling* selected to presently live out their faith
 4. *Who in every place* (not just Corinth) *call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, emphasizing the global and universal nature of the church in every age.

All believers everywhere call on the same Lord Jesus Christ.

- Interconnected and cross cultural
- All believers from every culture in every age have a common bond in Jesus Christ.
- So the church is universal and not local by nature.
- It's the sum total of all believers from Pentecost to the Rapture, enumerated by regions and cities.

Verse 3—*Grace to you and peace from God* is reminder of the eternal heavenly connection.

- It all comes *from God our Father*, and from *the Lord Jesus Christ*, the foundation of who we are, what we believe—our future is all wrapped up in Him.
- Notice the repetition of *Jesus Christ* in these first three verses, which emphasize the centrality of Christ in the church.
- This is our identity as well as our responsibility.
- Associated with Jesus Christ now marks one as His for special purposes—that is, to be saintly, set apart for Him, and from the world.
- The Corinthians, and us today, are connected together within this spiritual household.

That Relationship Has Entirely Changed Us, Our Destiny, and Our Perspective

Verse 4—*I thank my God concerning you*

- An amazing thing to say about a group of believers who were a constant problem for him.
- But God lived in them and He was at work within them.
- So Paul could be thankful primarily for what God had done for them, rather than their response to his ministry.

God's grace was given to them in Jesus Christ. So he knows they are believers.

There are four outcomes of God's grace:

- (1) **Verse 5**—*That in everything you were enriched in Him.* The believer has been completely furnished *in every way* with an abundance of spiritual gifts.
 - Two of those gifts include *all speech* and *every kind of knowledge*. These are spiritual gifts.
 - Blessing is spiritual and eternal for the church, not material and earthly.
- (2) **Verse 6**—*The testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in them* by the giving of the spiritual gifts by Christ to them.
 - The giving of these gifts affirmed the gospel message they received.
- (3) **Verse 7a**—*You are not lacking in any gift*
 - This spiritual enablement was comprehensively provided to them so that they were completely equipped.
- (4) **Verse 7b**—*They were awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
 - These gifts were to be used in ministry to one another while anticipating the Rapture of the church, which was an imminent event even then.
 - For Paul, all ministry was done in the context of future prophecy—the fact that Jesus is coming again.
 - Future prophecy is a motivation for holiness, ministry, spiritual maturity, and preparation for heaven (Colossians 1:28).

Ministry is always in light of eternity.

- Ministry is service with eternal values in mind.
- Ministry serves the needs of other believers.
- Ministry has eternal ramifications. Service has temporal benefit.

Believers must live in light of eternity, making Biblical values and standards **virtuous** by nature. The more eternal your mindset is, the more virtuous will be your life. So Paul says look what the grace of God has supplied—it's confirmed you belong to Christ, that you have adequate and abundant supply, so you can afford to focus on Christ's imminent return, making your life more virtuous.

Verse 8—*He will also strengthen you to the end*, to persevere in faithfulness

- Our ministry can be sustained by Christ's ownership
- Christ confirms our ministry to one another through the use of our gifts
- *so that you will be blameless* when He returns, accounting our ministry was useful. Again, notice the future eternal outlook to sustain ministry *on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Verse 9—*God is faithful from whom you were called into fellowship with His Son* both now in service to one another and at His revelation when He examines our service for Him.

- We were called into *fellowship* with His Son, that is, association and partnership with Christ in the work He is doing.

Application

Understand the church to be all believers everywhere during our age, from Pentecost to the Rapture. That means we view the church as all the believers beyond us and all around us, not exclusively the ones we know.

Believers Should Not Be Divided by Competitive Loyalties

Verse 10—This urgent summons is based on our association with the *Lord Jesus Christ*. So,

- (1) *That you all agree* to affirm and speak the same thing. Not compromise but agreement.
- (2) *That there be no divisions* or schisms (tears of a fabric) existing within this group relationship to one another.
- (3) *Be made complete* is to take the same view of things so as to judge correctly.
- (4) *In the same mind and same judgment* (mind, view, or purpose), meaning unanimity of perspective, striving for harmony in the direction of the will of God. Unity is oneness between individuals. We should strive for unity based on agreement in the truth.

Verse 11—*Chloe's people* had brought up the subject of division to the apostles. The Corinthians resolved their quarrels not by seeking agreement (verse 10) but by dividing up the church based on loyalties.

Verse 12—*Each one of you says I am of Paul* in spite of attempts to undermine his apostleship.

- *I of Apollos* preferring his polished preaching style (Acts 18:24).
- *I of Cephas* preferring a traditional leader.
- *I of Christ* avoiding attachment to any group.

Verse 13—*Has Christ been divided?* Paul asked.

Apparently, some people got baptized into these groups, *baptized in the name of Paul*

The three questions are rhetorical requiring 'No!' for an answer. Baptism is not necessary for identification seen by its limited scope in Paul's ministry

Verse 14—*I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius*

Verse 15—*that no man should say you were baptized in my name.*

Verse 16—*I did baptize also the household of Stephanus.* Baptism was not a means of identity with the apostle.

Verse 17—The reason for the apostle's ministry was *to preach the gospel*. Baptism is not a celebrity affair.

- Baptism is less a priority than the gospel, which came *not in cleverness of speech* to manipulate anyone or dazzle by eloquence. It's the message and not style of delivery that is paramount.
- *The cross of Christ should not be made void* as just another human philosophical system, empty and useless, as mere rhetoric.

Application

Don't become enamored with attention given to ministry celebrities, pastors, orators, writers, or musicians. Local institutional churches, denominations, and technology can breed competitive loyalties. Preserve agreement about what is true and be united about that. Do not divide yourselves to preserve what you believe to be true. Avoid conformation bias.

Pursue Loyalty to God's Wisdom in the Cross, Not Man's Wise Leaders

Verse 18—For those *perishing*, the gospel is **foolishness**. Not the preaching of the gospel but the content of it is 'silly and absurd'. Why is it that the *perishing* believe the *cross is foolishness*? Because they are not persuaded that the cross and its outcome is true.

- *To us who are being saved it is the power of God*. Why? We are convinced it is true and understand it eliminates the possibility of self-salvation. So what's more impressive, rhetoric or the gospel?

Worldly Wisdom Is Ineffective (verses 19-21)

Verse 19—Here is a quote from Isaiah 29:14 where the '*wise*' of Judah sought an alliance with Egypt when threatened by Sennacherib. The *wisdom of the wise* in that day did not deliver them. This shows that it has always been God's method to expose the folly of mere human wisdom *and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside*. What is *moronic* is the wisdom of the world.

Verse 20—If *the wisdom of the world* was the way of truth, then why didn't God chose *the wise, the scribe, the debater* to become His messengers? These are the ones that can make natural wisdom seem useful.

Verse 21—Human reasoning does not enable people to get to *know God* nor does it deliver them from their sins. These benefits come only *through the foolishness* that is the silliness and absurdity (in the eyes of the natural man) of *preaching* the gospel message.

By the world's wisdom one can explain all religions except Christianity—because all religions were created by human wisdom based in self-salvation. Human wisdom can't get from God to Jesus. For that, we need revelation!

The Gospel's Wisdom Is Effective (verses 22-25)

Verse 22—God called people to believe the gospel message—in what seems foolish. Instead, the Jews *ask for signs*, evidence of divine reality. The Gentiles prefer to *search for wisdom* rather than believe a foolish message. For both, the cross is absurd.

Verse 23—But we proclaim on God's terms *Christ crucified* as the only true sign and only true wisdom. It becomes a *stumbling block* to Jews looking for a political savior and *foolishness* to Greeks who are on a fruitless search for wisdom.

Verse 24—However, *to those who are called*, Christ is the instrument of God's wisdom in solving the problem human reasoning could not unravel, namely, how people can know God and come to God.

Verse 25—The reason is that *the foolishness of God* in the doctrine of the cross, though regarded as foolish by men, is *wiser than men*. This foolishness of God, though regarded as irrelevant by men, is more powerful than men's wisdom to change lives.

Application

Somewhere along the way we seem to have succumbed to the temptation to displace the foolishness of the cross with the wisdom of strategic planning, vision, success, and ministry goals.

Consider your Calling (verses 26-31)

Verse 26—As we *consider our calling* to salvation, remember this contrast. Christianity did not advance by *many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble* whether by political influence, military power, or wealthy means. Natural wisdom advances the world's causes this way.

Verses 27-28—By contrast, the gospel was sent worldwide through lips and lives of common folk from humble origins. Four times it said *but God has chosen*. The Old Testament is full of illustrations of God choosing less than promising material as His instruments.

He chose

- (1) *foolish* [μωρος dull or stupid] *things of the world to shame* [καταισχρηνο to dishonor or disgrace] *the wise*
- (2) *weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong*
- (3) *the base things of the world and the despised*
- (4) *the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are*

Verse 29—God chooses nobodies to achieve His purposes. God's system is polar-opposite to the system of the world and is a paradox to man. Why? So *no man should boast before God*. God has chosen this method so the glory might be His and His alone.

Verse 30—Our calling to salvation can only be attributed to God *by His own doing you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God*. Christ personified the *wisdom of God*, and in Him they and we experience *righteousness and sanctification and redemption*. This is what God's wisdom produces and it is all sourced in Christ. This plan, hidden from the worldly wise, was revealed to simple believers.

Verse 31—God has declared *let him who boasts, boast in the Lord* (Jeremiah 9:24). Jeremiah did not want Israel to brag about their ingenuity, and that serves as a reminder to us that our salvation and its attendant outcomes are from God. So our focus must be on the Lord, not on His servants.

Application

God ordained that one cannot find salvation by the wisdom of the world. The world's wisdom believes works in some form will gain eternal salvation. But God said your works actually keep you from finding salvation. The better, richer, nobler, wiser you are, the more you think you deserve salvation. So God's grace is available only through Jesus' cross. It seems foolishness to the perishing who believe they deserve God's grace. But those chosen are given understanding that it is of faith in Christ.