

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

I Corinthians

An Apostolic Introduction (I Cor. 1:1-3)

In the first 10 verses of I Corinthians, the name of Jesus Christ occurs no less than 10 times. This was going to be a difficult letter for Paul to write, because he was dealing with a difficult situation. In this difficult situation Paul's first and repeated thought was of Jesus Christ. Paul did not try to deal with this by means of a book of laws or by his own mental and spiritual powers, he took Jesus

This introduction tells us about several things:

- 1) It tells us about the Church. Paul speaks of *The Church of God which is at Corinth*. It was not the church of Corinth; it was the Church of God. To Paul, wherever an individual congregation might be, it was a part of the one Church of God. Nor would he have identified a congregation by the particular communion or sect to which it belonged. To him the Church was the Church of God. If we thought of the Church in that way we might remember more of the reality which unites us and less of the local differences which divide us.
- 2) This passage tells us something about the individual Christian. Paul says three things about him.
 - He is consecrated in Jesus Christ. The verb *to consecrate* means to set apart for God, to make it holy by the offering of a sacrifice upon it. The Christian has been consecrated to God by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to be one for whom Christ died and to know it and to realize that this sacrifice in a very special way makes us belong to God.
 - He describes the Christian as *those who have been called to be God's dedicated people*. We have translated one Greek word (Hagios) by this whole phrase. The Authorized Version translates it to *saints*. Nowadays that does not paint the right picture to us. *Hagios* describes a thing or a person that has been devoted to the possession and the service of God. It is the word by which to

describe a temple or a sacrifice which has been marked out for God. Now this person – marked for God – must show himself to be fit in life and in character for that service. That is how it comes to mean *holy, saintly*. But the root idea of the word is *separation*. A person who is *hagios* is *different* from others because he has been separated from ordinary people to belong in a special way to God. When Paul calls the Christian *hagios* he means that he is different from other men because he specially belongs to God and to God's service. And that difference is not to be marked by withdrawal from ordinary life, but by showing there a quality which will mark him out.

- Paul addressed his letter to those who have been called *in the company of those who in every place call upon the name of the lord*. The Christian is called into a community whose boundaries include all earth and all heaven. It would be greatly to our good if sometimes we lifted our eyes beyond our own little circle and thought of ourselves as part of the Church of God which is as wide as the world.

3) This passage tells us something about Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of our Lord Jesus Christ and then, as it were, he corrects himself and adds *their Lord and ours*. No man, no Church, has exclusive possession of Jesus Christ. He is our Lord but he is also the Lord of all men. A wonder of Christianity is that all men possess all the love of Jesus Christ, that "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love."

How do we "look at" the Church of God today? Do we see ourselves as "dedicated to" and "separated for" God? Do we consider ourselves as part of the company of ALL who call upon God "in every place" and "every way?" Is the Lord just "ours" or all who look to Him for "love?"

The Necessity of Thanksgiving (1 Cor. 1:4-9)

In this passage of thanksgiving, three things stand out:

1. There is the promise which came true. When Paul preached Christianity to the Corinthians, he told them that Christ could do certain things for them, and now he proudly claims that all that he pledged has come true.

2. There is the gift which has been given. Paul here uses a favorite word of his. It is *charisma*, which means a gift freely given to a man, a gift which he did not deserve and which he could never earn by himself. This gift of God, as Paul saw it comes in two ways:
 - a. Salvation is the *charisma* of God which a man could never achieve himself.
 - b. It gives a man whatever special gifts he may possess and whatever special equipment he may have for life. If a man has the gift of speech or the gift of healing, if he has the gift of music or of any art, if he has a craftsman's gifts, all these are gifts from God. If we fully realized that, it would bring a new atmosphere and character into life. Such skills that we possess are not our own achievement, they are gifts from God, and therefore, they are held in trust.
3. There is the ultimate end. In the Old Testament the phrase, *The Day of the Lord*, keeps recurring. It was the day when the Jews expected God to break into history, the old world would be wiped out and the new world would be born. The Christians took over this idea, only they took that phrase as *The Day of the Lord Jesus*, and regarded it as the day on which Jesus would come in all his power and glory. That indeed would be a day of judgment. It is Paul's belief that when the ultimate judgment comes, the man who is in Christ can meet it unafraid, because he will be clothed not in his own merits but in the merits of Christ, so that none will be able to impeach him.

How do we see our relationship with Christ? How do we look at "our" talents? What is our concept of "Humility" vs. "Pride?"

A Divided Church (1 Cor. 1:10-17)

Paul was writing from Ephesus to mend a situation which had arisen in the Church at Corinth. Christian slaves who belonged to a lady called Cloe had occasion to visit Corinth and they had come back with a tale of dissension and disunity. Paul twice addresses the Corinthians as *brothers*. By the use of the word, Paul does two things. First, he

softens the rebuke which is given, not as from a schoolmaster with a rod, but as from one who has no other emotion than love. Second, it would have shown them how wrong their dissensions and divisions were. They were bothers and they should have lived in brotherly love.

Paul uses two interesting phrases. He encourages them *to make up their differences* – two hostile parties reaching an agreement. He wants them to be *knit together* – a medical term of mending bones that have been fractured or dislocated. The disunion is not natural and must be cured for the sake of the body of the Church.

Paul identifies four parties in the church at Corinth. They have not broken away from the Church; the divisions are as yet within it. He uses the word *schismata* which means tears in a garment. The great figures that are mentioned are Paul, Cephas and Apollos. They had nothing to do with the divisions. It frequently happens that a man's so-called supporters are a bigger problem than his open enemies. Let's look at these parties and see if we can find out what they stood for.

- i. There were those who claimed to belong to **Paul**. Probably Gentiles. Paul had always preached the gospel of Christian freedom and the end of the law. This party probably was attempting to turn liberty into license and using this new Christianity as an excuse to do as they liked. They had forgotten that they were saved, not to be free to sin, but to be free not to sin.
- ii. There was the party who claimed to belong to **Apollos**. There is a character sketch of Apollos in *Acts 18:24*. He was a Jew from Alexandria, an eloquent man and well versed in the scriptures. Alexandria was the center of intellectual activity, where scholars had made a science of comparing the scriptures and finding the most obscure meaning in the simplest passages. The Alexandrians were the people who *intellectualized* Christianity into a philosophy rather than a religion.
- iii. There were those who claim to belong to **Cephas**. Cephas is the Jewish form of Peter's name. These were most likely Jews; and they

sought to teach that a man must still observe the Jewish law. They were legalists who exalted law, and, by doing so, belittled grace.

- iv. There were those who claimed to belong to **Christ**. This may be one of two things: (a) This may well not describe a party at all, but may be the comment of Paul himself on the whole wretched situation. (b) If that is not the case and this does describe a party, they must have been a small and rigid sect who claimed that they were the only true Christians in Corinth. Their real Paul was not in saying that they belonged to Christ, but in acting as if Christ belonged to them.

Paul is not belittling Baptism; the people he did baptize were very special converts. His point is that Baptism was *into the name of Jesus*. The phrase in Greek implies the closest possible connection. A soldier swore loyalty into the name of Caesar; he belonged absolutely to the Emperor. *Into the name of* implied utter possession. In Christianity it implied even more; it implied that the Christian was not only possessed by Christ but was in some way identified with Him. All that Paul is saying is, "I am glad that I was so busy preaching, because if I had baptized it would have given some of you the excuse to say that you were baptized into my possession instead of into Christ's." He is not making little of baptism; he is simply glad that no act of his could be misconstrued as annexing men for himself and not for Christ. It was Paul's aim to set before men, not himself but Christ in all His lonely grandeur.

How do we look at our baptism? Were we baptized *into* the Episcopalian religion, or into "Christ?" How do we look at those baptized into "other" religious faiths? How do we look at those of "non-Christian" religions? How should we look at all of these?

A Stumbling-Block To The Jew And Foolishness To The Greeks (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

To both the cultured Greek and the pious Jew, the story that Christianity was telling sounded like sheer folly. Paul shows how mere human wisdom is bound to fail. He cites the undeniable fact that for all its wisdom the world had never found God and was still blindly seeking Him. This search was designed by God to show men their own helplessness and so prepare the way for the acceptance of Him who is the one true way.

What then was this Christian Message? Reading the four great sermons in the Acts (2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:36-43) we find certain constant elements in the Christian preaching.

- There is the claim that the great promised time of God has come.
 - There is a summary of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - There is a claim that all this was the fulfillment of prophecy.
 - There is the assertion that Jesus will come again.
 - There is an urgent invitation to men to repent and receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.
- i. To the Jews, that was a stumbling-block for mainly two reasons: 1) to them it was incredible that one who had died on a cross could possibly be God's Chosen One. The crucifixion definitely disproved that Jesus was the Son of God. The Cross to the Jew was and is an insurmountable barrier to belief in Jesus. 2) The Jew looked for signs. Then the golden age of God came, he looked for startling happenings. At the time that Paul was writing there were many false Messiahs, and all of them had deluded the people into accepting them by the promise of wonders. In Jesus they saw one who was meek and lowly, one who deliberately avoided the spectacular, one who served and who ended on a Cross – which to them seemed an impossible picture of the Chosen One of God.
 - ii. To the Greeks, the message was foolishness. Again there were two reasons: 1) to the Greek the first characteristic of God was

apatheia – *apathy* meaning *total inability to feel*. The argued that God must be incapable of all feeling so that no one may affect him. A God who suffered was to the Greeks a contradiction terms. To the thinking Greek, the incarnation was a total impossibility. To people who thought like that, it was incredible that one now had suffered as Jesus had suffered could possibly be the Son of God. 2) The Greek sought wisdom. Originally the Greek word *sophist* mean a *wise man* in the good sense; but it came to mean a man who would spend endless hours discussing hair-splitting trifles, a man who had no real interest in solutions but who simply gloried in the stimulus of “the mental hike.” The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words; and to them the Christian preacher with his blunt message seemed a crude and uncultured figure, to be laughed at and ridiculed rather than to be listened to and respected.

It looked as if the Christian message had little chance of success against the background of Jewish or Greek life; but as Paul said, “What looks like god’s foolishness is wiser than men’s wisdom; and what looks like God’s weakness is stronger than men’s strength.”

How do we compare ourselves with the Jews and Greeks of Paul’s day when we “hear” God’s word, not just in the Gospels but in the sermons and lives of those around us? Do we “weight” it to our own expectations and understanding?

The Glory Of The Shame (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

Paul glories in the fact that for the most part, the Church was composed of the simplest and the humblest people. We should never think that the early Church was entirely composed of slaves. Even in the New Testament we see that people from the highest ranks of society were becoming Christians. But it remains true that the great majority of Christians were simple and humble folk.

It was precisely this that was the glory of Christianity. At this time in the Empire, there were sixty million slaves. In the eyes of the law a slave was a “living tool,” a thing and not a person at all. Christianity made people who were things into real men and women, even more like

sons and daughters of God. It told men who, in the eyes of the world were worthless, that, in the eyes of God they were worth the death of his only Son. Christianity was, and still is, the most uplifting thing in the whole universe.

The phrase which Paul uses to finish this passage reveals that it is only when we realize that we can do nothing and that God can and will do everything that real religion begins. It is the amazing fact of life that it is the people who realize their own weakness and their own lack of wisdom, who in the end are strong and wise. Experience shows that the man who thinks that he can take on life all be himself is certainly to be shipwrecked.

Note the four great things that Paul insists that Christ is for us.

- 1) He is *wisdom*. It is only in following him that we walk straight and only in listening to him that we hear the truth.
- 2) He is *righteousness* (a right relationship with God). Of our own efforts we can never achieve that. It is ours only by realizing through Jesus Christ that it comes not from what we can do for God, but from what he has done for us.
- 3) He is *consecration*. It is only in the presence of Christ that life can be what it ought to be. The Christian walks with him and only in that company can a man keep himself unspotted from the world.
- 4) He is *deliverance*. Jesus Christ can deliver a man from past sin, from present helplessness, and from future fear. He is the emancipator from slavery to self and to sin.

How do we look at others (person/thing)? How can we help others to see God (Christ) in us and in themselves? How can we reinforce and allow to show through Christ's presence in us (Paul's 4 things that Christ is for us)?

The Proclamation And The Power (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Paul remembers when he first came to Corinth, and three things stand out:

1. He came speaking in simplicity. Note that Paul had come to Corinth from Athens. It was there (Athens), for the only time in his life, he had attempted to reduce Christianity to philosophic terms. He had

tried to speak to the philosophers on Mars Hill in their own language, and it was there that he had one of his very few failures. It almost seemed that he said to himself, "Never again, I will from here on tell the story of Jesus in utter simplicity. I will know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him upon the Cross." For most people, the way to the recesses of a man's inmost being is not through his mind, but through his heart.

2. He came speaking in fear. We have to understand this carefully. It was not fear for his own safety; even less was it that he was ashamed of the gospel that he was preaching. It was what has been called "the trembling anxiety to perform a duty." The man who has no nervousness, no tension, in any task, may give an efficient performance; but it is the man who has this trembling anxiety who can produce an effect which artistry alone can never achieve.
3. He came with results and not with words only. The result of Paul's preaching was that things happened. He says that his preaching was unanswerably demonstrated to be true by the Spirit and power. The proof was in the changed lives. Something re-creating had entered into the polluted society of Corinth.

No one can argue against the proof of a changed life. It is our weakness that too often we have tried to talk men into Christianity instead of, in our own lives, showing them Christ. "A saint, is someone in whom Christ Lives again."

How do we hear/see the "sermons" in Church, the store, the street, the golf course? How do we preach Christ to others?

The Wisdom Which Is From God (I Cor. 2:6-9)

This passage introduces a distinction between different kinds of Christian instruction and different stages of the Christian life. In the early Church there were two kinds of instruction. One was called *Kerygma* which means a herald's *announcement*, and this was the plain announcement of the basic facts of Christianity, the announcement of the facts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and his

coming again. 2) The second was called *Didache*, which means *teaching* and this was the explanation of the meaning of the second stage for those who have already received *kerygma*.

This is what Paul is getting at here. Up to now he has been talking about Jesus Christ and him crucified; this was the basic announcement of Christianity; but, he goes on to say we don't stop there; Christian instruction goes on to teach not only the facts but the meaning of the facts. Paul says that this is done for those who have reached their physical and mental development. He says "Out in the streets, and to those who have just newly come into the Church, we talk about the basic elements of Christianity, but when people are a little more mature we give them deeper teaching about what these basic facts mean." The tragedy is that people are often content to remain at the elementary stage when they should be going on to think things out for themselves.

He insists that this special teaching is not the product of the intellectual activity of men; it is the gift of God and it came into the world with Christ. All our discoveries are not so much what our minds have found out, but what God has told us. This does not mean that it frees us from human effort. Only the student who works can make himself fit to receive the real riches of the mind of a great teacher. It is so with us and God. The more we strive to understand, the more God can tell us; and there is no limit to this process, because the riches of God are unsearchable.

**As a student of God, what "grade" do we put ourselves in?
How hard are we working to learn from "The Teacher?"**

Spiritual Things To Spiritual Men (I Cor. 2:10-16)

Basic things in this passage:

1. Paul lays down that the only person who can tell us about God is the Spirit. He uses a human analogy. There are feelings that are so personal, things which are so private, experiences which are so intimate that no one know them except a man's own spirit. Paul argues that the same is true of God. There are deep and intimate

things in him which only his Spirit knows; and that Spirit is the only person who can lead us into really intimate knowledge of God.

2. Even then it is not every man who can understand these things. Paul speaks about interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people. He distinguishes two kinds of men. a) There are those who are sensitive to the Spirit and whose life is guided by the Spirit. Every living thing has a “soul” – dogs, cats, man that gives it physical life, but the “Soul” in man makes him different from the rest of creation and like to God.

In verse 14 Paul speaks of the man who has a soul (small “s” – physical being) who live as if there was nothing beyond physical life and there were no needs other than material needs, whose values are all physical and material. A man like that cannot understand spiritual things. A man who thinks that nothing is more important than the satisfaction of the sex urge cannot understand the meaning of chastity, a man who ranks the amassing of material things as the supreme end of life cannot understand generosity; and a man who has never had a thought beyond this world cannot understand the things of God. To him they look at (spiritual things) as mere foolishness. For him, the Spirit of God will speak to him but he will not hear.

It is easy to become so involved in the world that there exists nothing beyond it. We must pray to have the mind of Christ, for only when he dwells within us are we safe from the encroaching invasion of the demands of material things.

How do we see our (S)soul? Are we open to God’s word?

The Supreme Importance Of God (I Cor. 3:1-9)

Paul has just been talking about the difference between the man who is spiritual, and therefore can understand spiritual truths, and the man whose interests and aims do not go beyond physical life and therefore cannot grasp spiritual truth. He now accuses the Corinthians of being still at the physical stage. In verse 1 he uses a word which comes from (sarx) which means *flesh*. So Paul begins by

saying that the Corinthians are made of flesh, which in itself is not a rebuke because just because he is a man he is made of flesh, **but** he must not stay that way. The trouble was that the Corinthians were not only made of flesh but were dominated by the flesh. To Paul the flesh is much more than merely a physical thing. It means human nature apart from God, that part of man both mental and physical which provides a pathway for sin. So the fault that Paul finds with the Corinthians is not that they are made of flesh (all men are) but that they have allowed this lower side of their nature to dominate all their outlook and all their actions.

What is it about their life and conduct that makes Paul level such a rebuke at them? It is their party spirit, their strife and their factions. This is significant because it means that *you can tell what a man's relations are with God by looking at his relations with his fellow men*, if he is quarrelsome, argumentative, trouble making creature, he might be a regular attendee at church, even be a church officer, but he is not a man of God. But if a man is at one with his fellow men, if his relations with them are marked by love and unity and concord, then he is on the way to being a man of God. If a man loves God, he will also love his fellow men.

Paul goes on to show the folly of this party spirit with its glorification of human leaders. In a garden one man may plant a seed and another may water it; but either can claim to have made the seed grow. That belongs to God alone. God uses human instruments to bring to men the message of His truth and love; but it is he alone who wakes the hearts of men to new life. He created the heart so He alone can re-create it.

Have there been times in our lives when we deserved some of Paul's "rebuke?" What can we do to prevent ourselves from focusing on the "physical" and concentrate on deepening our relationship/understanding of God's love?

The Foundation And The Builders (I Cor. 3:10-15)

Here Paul is certainly speaking from personal experience. He was a foundation layer, and was always on the move. Its true he stayed

eighteen months in Corinth and three years in Ephesus, but in Thessalonica, he stayed less than a month, and that was far more typical. There was so much ground waiting to be covered; there were so many men who had never heard the name of Jesus; and, if a fair start was to be made with the evangelization of the world, Paul could only lay the foundations and then move on. It was only when he was in prison that his restless spirit could stay in the one place.

Wherever he went, he laid the same foundation. That was the proclamation of the facts about and the offer of Jesus Christ. It was his job to introduce men to Jesus because it is in him and him alone, that a man can find three things.

- He finds *forgiveness for past sins*. He finds himself in a new relationship to God and suddenly discovers that he is his friend and not his enemy. He discovers that God is like Jesus; where once he saw hatred, he now sees love, and where once he saw infinite remoteness he now sees tender intimacy.
- He finds *strength for the present*. Through the presence and help of Jesus he finds courage to cope with life, for he is now no longer an isolated unity fighting a lonely battle with an adverse universe. He lives a life on which nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He walks life's ways and fights its battles with Christ.
- He finds *hope for the future*. He no longer lives in a world in which he is afraid to look forward but in one where God is in control and working together in all things for good. He lives in a world where death is no longer the end, but only the prelude to greater glory. Without the foundation of Christ, a man can have none of these.

Have we found all three of these in our own lives? Can we recall specific incidents in our lives for each of these? Have we ever NOT left these in God's Hands?

Wisdom And Foolishness (I Cor. 3:16-22)

To Paul the Church was the very temple of God because it was the society in which the Spirit of God dwelt. Origen has said, "We are most of all God's temple when we prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit."

But, if men introduce dissension and division into the fellowship of the Church, they destroy the temple of God in two ways.

- They make it impossible for the Spirit to operate. When bitterness enters church, love goes from it. The truth can neither be spoken nor heard in that atmosphere. “Where love is, God is,” but where hatred and strife are, God stands at the door and knocks but the door does not open. The badge of the Church is love for the brethren. He destroys that love and therefore destroys the Church and destroys the temple of God.
- They split up the Church and reduce it to a series of disconnected ruins. No building can stand firm and square if sections of it are removed. The Church’s greatest weakness is still its divisions. They too destroy it.

Paul goes on to pin down the root cause of this dissension and consequent destruction of the Church. It is the worship of intellectual, worldly wisdom. Paul shows the condemnation of the wisdom by two Old Testament quotes; *Job 5:13* and *Psalms 94*. It is by this worldly wisdom that the Corinthians gauge the worth of the different teachers and leaders. It is this pride in the human mind which makes them evaluate and criticize the way in which the message is delivered, rather than think only of the content of the message itself. The problem with this intellectual pride is that it always brings out two things:

- It leads to disputes. It cannot keep silent and admire; it must talk and criticize. It is never humble enough to learn; it must always be laying down the law.
- Intellectual pride is characteristically exclusive. Its tendency is to look down on others rather than to sit down beside them. All who do not agree with it are wrong. It tends to cut men off from each other rather than to unite them.

Paul urges the man who would be wise to become a fool. Simply put – he urges him to be humble enough to learn. No one can teach a man who thinks that he knows it all already. The only way to become wise

is to realize that we are fools; the only way to knowledge is to confess our ignorance.

In verse 22 the march of Paul's prose suddenly takes wings and become a lyric of passion and poetry. The Corinthians are doing what is Paul and inexplicable thing. They are seeking to give themselves over into the hands of some man. Paul tells them that it is not they who belong to him but he who belongs to them. This allegiance to one party is equivalent to slavery. In fact they are masters of all things, because they belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Do we put our allegiance to one man, organization, church, religion or ourselves? What can we do to put our focus in the correct direction? What can we do to help others correct their focus?

The Three Judgments (I Cor. 4:1-5)

Paul urges the Corinthians NOT to think of Apollos and Cephas and himself as leaders of parties; but to think of them all as servants of Christ. Then Paul uses another picture. He thinks of himself and his fellow preachers as *stewards (major domo)* of the secrets which God desires to reveal to his own people. Whatever is a man's position in the Church, and whatever power he may yield there or whatever prestige he may enjoy, he still remains the servant of Christ.

This brings Paul to the thought of judgment. The one thing that a *steward* must be is **reliable**. The fact that he enjoys so much independence and responsibility makes it all the more necessary that his master should be able to depend absolutely upon him. The Corinthians, with their sects and their appropriation of the leaders of the Church as their masters, have exercised judgments on these leaders, preferring one to the other. So Paul speaks of three judgments that every man must face.

- (i) He must face the judgment of his *fellow men*. In this case Paul says that that is nothing to him. But there is a sense in which a man cannot disregard the judgment of his fellow men. The odd thing is that, in spite of its occasional radical mistakes, the judgment of our fellow men is often right. That is due to the fact that every man

instinctively admires the basic qualities of honor, honesty, reliability, generosity, sacrifice and love. It is true that we should never let the judgment of men deflect us from what we believe to be right; but it is also true that the judgment of men is often more accurate than we would like to think, because they instinctively admire the lovely things.

- (ii) He must face the judgment of *himself*. Once again Paul disregards that. He knew very well that a man's judgment of himself can be clouded by self-satisfaction, by pride and by conceit. But in a very real sense, every man must face his own judgment. A man cannot get away from himself and if he loses his self-respect, life becomes an intolerable thing.
- (iii) He must face the judgment of *God*. In the last analysis this is the only real judgment. For Paul, the judgment he awaited was not that of any human day, but the judgment of the Day of the Lord. God's is the final judgment for two reasons: (a) Only God knows all the *circumstances*. He knows the struggles a man has had; he knows the secrets that a man can tell to no one; He knows what a man might have sunk to and he also knows what he might have climbed to. (b) Only God knows all the *motives*. "Man sees the deed but God sees the intention." A deed may look noble but may have been done from selfish and ignoble motives; and other deeds might look base, but are done from the highest motives.

We would do well to remember two things – first, even if we escape all other judgments or shut our eyes to them, we cannot escape the judgment of God; and second, judgment belongs to God and we do well not to judge any man.

Is our allegiance to a *leader* or to God? What "store" do we put on the three *judgments* – fellow men, ourselves, God? Let's discuss each of these.

Apostolic Humility and unchristian Pride (I Cor. 4:6-13)

All that Paul has been saying about himself and about Apollos is true not only for them but also for the Corinthians. It is not only he and

Apollos who must be kept humble by the thought that it is not the judgment of men they are facing, but the judgment of God; the Corinthians must walk in the same humility. Paul had a wonderfully courteous way of including himself in his own warnings and his own condemnations. The true preacher seldom uses the word *you* and always uses the word *we*; he does not speak down to men; he speaks as one who sits where they sit and who is a man of like passions with them. It is not his own words that Paul insists the Corinthians must not go beyond; it is the word of God, which condemns all pride.

Then Paul asks them the most pertinent and basic of all questions. “What do you possess that you did not receive?” In this single sentence Augustine saw the whole doctrine of Grace. No man could ever have known him unless God had revealed himself; no man could ever have won his own salvation; a man does not save himself, he is saved. When we think of what we have done and think of what God has done for us, pride is ruled out and only humble gratitude remains. The basic fault of the Corinthians was that they had forgotten that they owed their souls to God.

Then comes one of those clear outbursts which we see again and again in the letter of Paul. He turns on the Corinthians with scathing irony. He compares their pride, their self-satisfaction, their feeling of superiority with the life that an apostle lives. He uses a vivid picture. When a Roman general won a great victory, he was allowed to parade his victorious army through the streets of the city with all the “trophy” that he had won; the procession was called a Triumph. But at the end was a little group of captives who were doomed to death. The Corinthians in their blatant pride were like the conquering general; the apostles were like the little group of captives doomed to die. To the Corinthians the Christian life meant flaunting their privileges and displaying their achievement; to Paul it meant humble service and readiness to die for Christ.

In the list of things which Paul declares that the apostles endure there are two especially interesting words. (1) He says that they are *buffeted*.

That is the word used for beating a slave. Paul was willing for the sake of Christ to be treated like a slave. (2) He says, "When we are *insulted* we bless." We probably don't realize how surprising a statement this is to a pagan. To the ancient world, Christian humility was a virtue altogether new. This indeed was the kind of conduct that to men looked very foolish, although this very foolishness was the wisdom of God.

By our words and actions, are we a "true" preacher of God's life and word? Can we name anything that we have done on our own (by ourselves)? What is humility? Is there any "pride" that we can have? How do we see Paul's two words (buffeted; insulted) in our own lives?

A Father In The Faith (I Cor. 4:14-21)

With this passage, Paul brings to an end the section of the letter which deals directly with the dissensions and divisions at Corinth. It is as a father that he writes. The very word which he uses in verse 14 *to warn* is the word regularly used to express the admonition and advice which a father gives his children. He may be speaking with the tone of severity, but it is not the severity which seeks to bring an unruly slave to his knees, but the severity which seeks to put back on the right rails a foolish son who has gone astray – "tuff love".

Paul felt that he was in a unique position as regards the Corinthian Church. He (Paul) was an old and trusted slave who daily took the child to school, who trained him in moral matter, cared for his character and tried to make a man of him. A child might have many tutors but he had only one father; in the days to come, the Corinthians might have many tutors but none of them could do what Paul had done; none of them could beget them to life in Christ Jesus.

Then Paul says an amazing thing. In effect he says, "I call upon you my children to take after their father." It is seldom that a father can say that. For most fathers, it is his hope and prayer that a son will turn out to be all that he never succeeded in doing. "Do as I say, not as I

do.” But Paul not with pride, but with complete unselfishness, can call upon his children in the faith to copy him.

Then he pays them a delicate complement. He says that he will send Timothy to remind them of his ways. In effect, he says that all their errors and mistaken ways are due, not to deliberate rebellion, but to the fact that they have forgotten. This is so true of human nature. Often it is not that we rebel against Christ; it is simply that we forget him. Most of us need one thing above all – a deliberate effort to live in the conscious realization of the presence of Jesus Christ. It is not only at the sacrament, but at every moment of every day that Jesus Christ is saying to us, “Remember Me.”

Paul moves on to a challenge. They need not say that because he is sending Timothy, he is not coming himself. He will come if the way opens up; and then will come their test. These Corinthians can talk enough; but it is not their eloquence that matters; it is their deeds. The world is full talk about Christianity, but one deed is worth a thousand words.

In the end, Paul demands whether to come to hand out discipline, or cover them with love. The love of Paul for his children in Christ resounds through every letter he wrote; but he says this love sometimes comes with discipline, when necessary, and he is prepared to give it. Paul’s love was the love which knows that sometimes it has to hurt in order to amend.

Paul has dealt with the problem of strife and divisions within the Corinthian Church, and now – because of news that has come to him - he goes on to deal with certain very practical questions and certain very grave situations within the Church.

**How do we “look at” our fellow Christians/ non Christians?
How do we treat those who have gone against “us” and or
our beliefs? How should we look at/treat them? What can
we do to be more like Christ and/or Paul?**

Sin And Complacency (I Cor.5:1-5)

Paul is dealing with what, for him, was a recurring problem. In sexual matters the “heathen” did not know the meaning of chastity. They took their pleasure when and where they wanted it. It was very hard for the Christian Church to escape this infection. They were like an island surrounded by a sea of paganism; they were so new to this infant belief that it made it difficult to unlearn the practices that were part of their lives for generations. Yet if the Church was to be kept pure they MUST say goodbye to their old pagan ways. In the Church at Corinth, a specially shocking case had arisen. A man had formed an illicit association with his own step-mother which was expressly forbidden by the Jewish law. She may have already been divorced from her husband, and probably was not a Jew because Paul does not deal with her at all – outside the jurisdiction of the Church.

Shocked at the sin, Paul was even more shocked by the attitude of the Corinthian Church to the sinner. They had complacently accepted the situation and done nothing about it when they should have been grief-stricken. It has been said that our one security against sin lies in our being shocked at it. It is not a question of being critical and condemning, it is a question of being wounded and shocked. It was sin that crucified Jesus; it was to free men from sin that he died. No Christian man can take an easy-going view of it.

Paul’s verdict is that the man must be dealt with. In a vivid phrase, he says that he must be handed over to Satan - excommunicated. As severe as this seems, it is not vindictive. It was in order to humiliate the man, to bring about the taming and the eradication of his lusts so that in the end his spirit should be saved.

Paul goes on to some very practical advice. Verses 6-8 – originally “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, even as you are unleavened...” With few exceptions, leaven stands for an evil influence in Jewish literature. It was dough which had been kept over from a previous baking and in keeping it, it had fermented – putrefied.

The Passover bread was unleavened. More than that, on the day before the Passover Feast, the law laid it down that the Jew must light a candle and search his house for leaven, and that every last bit must be cast out. Christ's sacrifice on the cross has delivered us from sin,, as God delivered the Israelites from Egypt. Therefore, he goes on, the last remnant of evil must be cleared out of our lives. If you let an evil influence into the Church, it can corrupt the whole society, as the leaven permeates the whole lump of dough.

Here again we have a great practical truth. Discipline has sometimes to be exercised for the sake of the Church. To shut our eyes to offences is not always a kind thing to do – it may be damaging. A poison must be eliminated before it spreads. Discipline should never be exercised for the satisfaction of the person who exercises it, but always for the mending of the person who has sinned and for the sake of the Church. Discipline must never be vengeful, it must always be a healing process.

When we exercise discipline to correct a wrong that we have seen, what are our motives? What do we hope to accomplish? What are our “emotions” at the time?

The Church And The World (I Cor. 5:9-13)

In this passage, it appears that Paul had already written a letter to the Corinthians where he urged them to avoid the society of all evil men. This was meant to be applied only to members of the Church; not that wicked men must be disciplined by being ejected from the society of the Church until they mended their ways. Some Corinthians had taken this to be an absolute prohibition to be observed only if they withdrew themselves from the world altogether. In a place like Corinth, it would have been impossible to carry on a normal life without associating in ordinary everyday affairs with those whose lives the Church would utterly condemn. Paul would never recommend a Christianity which withdrew from the world, to him it was something that had to be lived out in the world.

It is interesting to see the three sins which he chooses as typical of the world – classes of people.

- i. There are the *fornicators*, those guilty of lax morality. The root cause of sexual immorality is a wrong view men. It declares that the passions and instincts which they share with the beasts must be shamelessly gratified and regards the other person as an instrument through which that gratification may be obtained. Christianity regards man as a child of God, and, because of that, as a creature who lives in the world but who always looks beyond it, a person who will not dictate his life by purely physical needs and desires, one who has a body but also a spirit.
- ii. There are those who are *greedy* for this world's goods. Only Christianity can banish that spirit. If we judge things by purely material standards, there is no reason why we should not dedicate our lives to the task of getting. Christianity introduces a spirit which looks outward and not inward. It makes love the highest value in life and service the greatest honor. When the love of God is in a man's heart, he will find joy not in getting but in giving.
- iii. There are the *idolaters*. Ancient idolatry is paralleled by modern superstition. There have been few ages focused on charms, astrologers and horoscopes, as this. The reason is that it is a basic rule of life that a man must worship something. Unless he worships the true God he will worship the gods of luck. Whenever religion grows weak, superstition grows strong.

Note that these three basic sins are representative of the three directions in which a man sins.

- a) Fornication is a sin against *a man's own self*. By falling to it he has reduced himself to the level of an animal. He has allowed his lower nature to defeat his higher and made himself less than a man.
- b) Greediness is a sin against *our neighbors and our fellow men*. It regards human beings as persons to be exploited rather than as brothers to be helped. It forgets that the only proof that we do love God must be the fact that we love our neighbors as ourselves.
- c) Idolatry is a sin against *God*. It allows things to take God's place. It is the failure to give God the first and only place in life.

It is Paul's principle that we are not to judge those outside the Church (Jewish phrase meaning outside the Chosen People). We must leave their judgment to God who alone knows the hearts of men. The man within the Church is a man who has taken an oath to Christ and can therefore be called in question for how he keeps it.

So Paul comes to an end with this command, "Put away the wicked man from amongst you." There are times when a cancer must be cut out; when drastic measures must be taken to avoid infection. It is not Paul's desire to hurt or to show his power, it is the pastor's desire to protect his infant Church from the ever threatening infection of the world.

Have we seen these three categories of sin in our own lives? In the lives of others? How do/did we deal with them in ourselves? In others?

The Folly Of The Law Courts (I Cor. 6:1-8)

Paul is dealing with a problem which was aimed at the Greeks. The Jews did not go to the public courts of law at all. To them justice was more a thing to be settled in a family spirit than in a legal spirit. Jewish law forbade a Jew to go to law in a non-Jewish court, if they did, it was blasphemy against the divine law of God. It was completely opposite for the Greeks; the courts of law were one of their chief entertainments.

The Athenian law had an elaborate system of arbiters. In a Greek city every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a very great part of his time either deciding or listening to law cases. The Greeks were notorious for going to law. Certain of the Greeks had brought their litigious nature to the Christian Church, which shocked Paul. His Jewish background made the whole thing revolting to him. What made the matter still more fantastic to Paul was that in the picture of the golden age to come, the Messiah was to judge the nations and the saints were to share in that judgment. So Paul demands, "If some day you are going to judge the world ... how can you go and submit your cases to men, and heathen men at that?" "If you must do it, do it inside the Church."

Then Paul seizes on the great essential principle. To go to law at all, and especially to go to law with a brother, is to fall far below the Christian standard of behavior. A Christian does not order his dealings with others by the desire for recompense and the principles of justice. He orders them by the spirit of love; and the spirit of love will insist that he live at peace with his brother, and forbids him to lower himself by going to law.

Do we look to “get even” with our “brothers?” Do we (can we) reconcile with those who offend us before we go to someone else? Is Christian love part of our reconciliation

Such Were Some Of You (I Cor. 6:9-11)

Paul goes into a terrible catalogue of sins that is a grim commentary on the corrupt civilization in which the Corinthian Church was growing up. There are certain things which are not pleasant to talk about, but we must look at this list to understand the environment of the early Christian Church; and to see that human nature has not changed very much.

- There were *fornicators* and *adulterers*. We have already seen the sexual laxity as a norm for them, and that the virtue of chastity was virtually unknown to them.
- There were *idolaters*. The greatest building in Corinth was the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, where idolatry and immorality flourished side by side. Idolatry is a grim example when we try to make religion easier.
- There were *sensualists*. The word literally means those who are soft and effeminate, those who have lost their manhood and live for the luxuries of material pleasures.
- There were *thieves* and *robbers*. The ancient world was cursed with them. Houses were easy to break into. The robbers particularly went to two places – the public baths and the public gymnasiums where they stole the clothes of those who were washing or exercising themselves. It was common to kidnap slaves who had special gifts.

- There were *drunkard* (uncontrolled drinking). Normally the Greeks were sober people, their drink was three parts wine mixed with two parts of water. But in luxury-loving Corinth uncontrolled drunkenness was rampant.
- There were *rapacious* men (aggressive getting to which he has no right) and *robbers* (grasping – grabbing that to which it has no right with a kind of savage ferocity).
- There were *homosexuals*. This sin swept like a cancer through Greek life and from Greece, invaded Rome. We can scarcely realize how rampant the ancient world was with it. Even great scholars and influential men practices it. In this particular vice, in the time of the early Church, the world was lost to shame; and there is little doubt that this was one of the main causes of the degeneracy and final collapse of its civilization.

The power of Christ is still the same. No man can change himself, but Christ can change him. There is the most amazing contrast between the pagan and the Christian literature of the day. Into this world, conscious of a tide of decadence that nothing could stop, there came the radiant power of Christianity, which was triumphantly able to make all things new.

Do we see this in our own day? (Silly question) Do we judge according to the world's standards, or our Christian Standards. How should we judge? Do we judge as ourselves or do we leave the judgment and love up to God?

Bought With A Price (I Cor. 6:12-20)

Here Paul is up against a whole series of problems. Paul's battle cry is "Glorify God with your body."

The Greeks always looked down on the body - : "The body is a tomb." The important thing was the soul, the spirit of a man'; the body did not matter. Resulted in two opposite outlooks: 1) it issued in the most rigorous asceticism in which everything was done to subject and humiliate the desires and instincts of the body; or 2) (prevalent in

Corinth) since the body was of no importance, you could do what you like with it; you could let it satisfy its appetites. If the Christian man is the freest of all men, then is he not free to do what he likes, especially with this completely unimportant body of his?

So the Corinthians argued – let the body have its way. The stomach was made for food and food for the stomach. The body was made for sexual acts and the sexual act is made for it, therefore let the desires of the body have their way.

Paul's answer is the stomach and food are passing things; the day will come when they will both pass away. But the body, the personality, the man as a whole will not away; he is made for union with Christ in this world and still closer union after death.

Paul is not writing a treatise, he is preaching, pleading with a heart on fire and a voice that will use whatever arguments it can find. He says that of all sins fornication is the one that affects a man's body and insults it, i.e. he sins against his own body, which is destined for union with Christ.

He makes one last appeal. Just because God's Spirit dwells in us we have become a temple of God; and so our bodies are sacred, Christ died to save the whole man, body and soul. Because of that a man's body is not his own to do with as he likes; it is Christ's and he must use it, not for his own lustful satisfaction but for the glory of Christ.

There are two great thoughts here:

- It is Paul's insistence that, though he is free to do anything, he will let nothing master him. The Christian faith does not make a man free to sin, but that it makes a man free *not* to sin. Habits should not master us; but the Christian strength enables us to master them.
- It is Paul's insistence that we are not our own. There is no such thing as a self-made man. The Christian is a man who thinks not of his rights but of his debts. He can never do what he likes, because he never belongs to himself; he must always do what Christ likes, because Christ bought him at the cost of his life.

Have we paid our own debts to Christ? Can we? Do we still look for our own “rights?”

In the next section of our letter (Chapter 7 through Chapter 15) Paul sets himself to deal with a set of problems concerning which the Corinthian Church had written to him, asking for advice. Indication that this might have been part of the second letter to the Corinthians. Chapter 7 deals with a whole series of problems regarding *marriage*. Here is a summary of what the Corinthian Church sought and obtained advice from Paul.

- Advice to those who think that Christians should not marry at all.
- Advice those who urge that even those who are married should abstain from all sexual relations with each other.
- Advice to the unmarried and to widows
- Advice to those who think that married people should separate.
- Advice to those who think that if the marriage is one in which one of the partners is a Christian and one a pagan, it should be broken up and dissolved.
- Instruction to live the Christian life in whatever state they happen to be in.
- Advice regarding virgins
- Exhortation that nothing should interfere with concentration upon serving Christ because the time is short and he will very soon come again.

Complete Asceticism (1 Cor. 7:1-2)

We have seen that in Greek thought there was strong tendency to despise the body and the things of the body; and that that tendency could issue in a position where they said “The body is completely unimportant; therefore we can do what we like with it and it makes no difference if we allow its appetites to have their fullest play.” It could bring it to the opposite point of view, “The body is evil;

therefore we must bring it into subjection; therefore we must completely obliterate it, and/or we must completely deny all the instincts and desires which are natural to it.” It is this second way of looking at things that Paul is addressing here. At least some of the Corinthians had suggested that, if a man was going to be a Christian in the fullest sense of the term, he must have done with physical things and must refuse to marry altogether.

Paul’s answer faces reality. In effect he says “Remember where you are living; remember that you are living in Corinth where you cannot even walk along the street without temptation rearing its head at you. Remember your own physical constitution and the healthy instincts which nature has given you. You will be far better to marry than to fall into sin.”

This sounds like a low view of marriage. It sounds as if Paul is advising marriage in order to avoid a worse fate. Rather he is honestly facing the facts and laying down a rule which is universally true./ No man should attempt a way of life for which he is naturally unfitted. Paul knew very well that all men are not made the same. He says, “Examine yourself and choose that way of life in which you can best live the Christian life, and don’t attempt an unnatural standard which is impossible and even wrong for you being what you are.

How can we apply this to ourselves, our past and our Present? Have we ever focused on our own pleasures? What brought us back to the focus on Christian principles? Have we been instrumental in bringing anyone (family/friend) back to Christ? How did we accomplish this?

The Partnership Of Marriage (1 Cor. 7:3-7)

This passage comes from a suggestion from Corinth that if married people are to be true Christians they should abstain from all intercourse with each other – idea that the body and all its instincts are evil. Paul declares a supremely great principle that Marriage is a partnership. They must always act together. The husband must never regard the wife simply as means of self-gratification. In a time of special

discipline, in a time of long and earnest prayer, it might be right to set aside all bodily things; but it must be by mutual agreement and only for a time, or it simple egets a situation which gives temptation an easy open door.

Once again Paul seems to belittle marriage. This is not an ideal command; it is a considerate concession to human weakness. He would prefer as an ideal that everyone was as he was. What exactly was that? We can only surmise.

We may be fairly certain that at some time Paul had been married. 1) He was a Rabbi and he claimed that he had failed in none of the duties which Jewish law and tradition laid down. Orthodox Jewish belief laid down the obligations of marriage. God had said, “Be fruitful and multiply.” and, therefore, not to marry and not to have children was to be guilty of breaking a positive commandment of God. As devout and orthodox a Jew as Paul once was, it is unlikely that he would have remained unmarried. 2) On particular grounds there is also evidence that Paul was married for he must have been a member of the Sanhedrin for he says that he gave his vote against the Christians. (*Acts 26: 10*). It was a regulation that members of the Sanhedrin must be married men, because it was held that married men were more merciful.

It may be that Paul’s wife died; it is even more likely that she left him and broke up his home when he became a Christian, so that he did indeed literally give up all thins for the sake of Christ. It is probable that he banished that side of life once and for all and never remarried. It is not that Paul is really looking down on marriage; it is rather that he is insisting that all a man’s concentration must be on being ready for the coming of Christ.

Has our marriage (past/present) helped or hindered our journey to God’s love? In what way has it accomplished this?

The Bond That Must Not Be Broken (1 Cor. 7:8-16)

This passage deals with three different sets of people.

- Those who are unmarried or who are widows. In the circumstances of an age which, as Paul thought, was hastening to its end, they would be better to remain as they are; but he warns them not to court temptation, not to attempt a situation which would be dangerous for them. If they are naturally passionate, they should marry. Paul was sure that no one could lay down ONE course of action for everyone. It all depended on the person involved.
- Those who are married. Paul forbids divorce on the grounds that Jesus forbade it. (*Mark 10:9; Luke 16:18*) If they must separate, he forbids remarriage. This seems a hard doctrine, but in Corinth with its laxity, it was better to keep the standards so high that no taint of loose living could enter the Church.
- The marriage of believers and unbelievers. Here Paul gives his own judgment, because there is no definite command of Jesus to refer to. There were those in Corinth who declared that a believer must never live with an unbeliever. In the event of one partner of a marriage becoming a Christian and the other remaining a non-Christian, separation must follow at once.

One of the heathen complaints against Christianity was that Christianity did break up families and was a disruptive influence in society. Undoubtedly mixed marriages produced problems.

Paul dealt with this problem with supreme practical wisdom. He said that if the two could agree to live together, let them do so; but if they wished to separate and found living together intolerable, let them do so, because the Christian was never meant to be a slave.

Paul has two great things to say which are of real value.

1. He has the lovely thought that the unbelieving partner is consecrated by the believer. They two have become one flesh and the wonder is that in such a case it is not the taint of the non-believer but the grace of Christianity which wins the victory. A child born into a Christian home, even where only one of the partners is a Christian, is born into the family of Christ.

2. He has the thought that this very association may be the means of saving the soul of the unbelieving partner. For Paul, evangelization began at home. The unbeliever was not to be look at as something unclean and to be avoided, but as another son or daughter to be won for God.

Did God really forbid divorce? Do we really have to marry only those of our own faith?

Serving God Where God Has Set Us (1 Cor. 7:17-24)

Paul lays down one of the first rules of Christianity, "Be a Christian where you are." It must have happened often that when a man became a Christian he would have like to break away from his job, and from the circle in which he moved and begin a new life. But Paul insisted that the function of Christianity was not to give a man a new life, but to make his old life new. What did make a difference was the kind of life he lived. Paul reminds them that slave or free, a man is a slave of Christ because Christ bought him with a price.

Are we ruled by our human situation, or are we ruled by our Christianity? Does our humanity or Christianity have the highest priority? Are our actions/life dedicated to Us or to Christ?

Wise Advice On A Difficult Problem (1 Cor. 7:25, 36-38)

These verses deal with the problem concerning virgins. The next section (verses 26-35), give the reason for accepting the advich which runs through the whole chapter. This section *concerning virgins* has always been a problem. It has been given three different explanations.

1. It has been regarded simply as advice to fathers as to the marriage of their unmarried daughters; but it does not read like that; and it is hard to see why Paul uses the word virgin if he means daughter.
2. It has been regarded as dealing with a problem which in later times became acute and which more than one Church Council tried to deal with and forbade – to be married, share the same bed and yet have no physical relations. This must have resulted in an impossible

situation. In such a relationship the woman was known as the man's virgin. It may well be that this custom had arisen in the Church at Corinth. If so, then Paul is saying, "If you can retain this difficult situation through self-discipline and self-control and maintain it, then it is better to do so; but, if you have tried it and have found that it is too great a strain on human nature, then abandon it and marry; and to do so will be no discredit to you."

3. The above (2) is probably the correct interpretation, but we should note a modification of it. It is suggested that in Corinth there were men and women who had actually gone through the marriage ceremony but had decided never to consummate the marriage and live in absolute continence to devote themselves completely to the spiritual life. If what they planned placed too great a strain upon them, then Paul would be saying, "If you can keep your vow, all well and good, but if you cannot, admit it and enter into normal relations with each other."

To us the whole relationship seems dangerous and abnormal and even wrong; and so it was; and in time the Church was compelled to tag it as wrong. But given the situation, Paul's advice is full of wisdom. He really says three things.

- Self-discipline is an excellent thing. Any means by which a man tames himself until he has all his passions under perfect control is a good thing, but it is not a part of Christian duty to eliminate the natural instincts of man; rather the Christian uses them to the glory of God.
- Paul really is saying, "Don't make an unnatural thing of your religion." That is the gift of the monks and hermits and nuns. Christianity was meant to abolish normal life; it was meant to glorify it.
- In the end Paul is saying, "Don't make an agony of your religion." No man should be ashamed of the body God gave him, the heart God put into him, the instincts that, by God's creation, dwell within him. Christianity will teach him, not how to eliminate them, but how to use them in such a way that passion is pure and human love the most ennobling thing in all God's world.

Is virginity/celebrity wrong? Is it for everyone? Should we strive to be celibate, a virgin, married? How do circumstances change to reverse our decisions?

The Time Is Short (1 Cor. 7:26-35)

It is a pity that Paul did not begin the chapter with this section, because it was the heart of his whole position on it. All through this chapter we must have felt that he was belittling marriage. It looked again and again as if he was allowing marriage only as a concession to avoid fornication and adultery; as if marriage was only a second best.

We have seen that the Jews glorified marriage and considered it a sacred duty. There was only one valid reason, according to Jewish tradition, for not marrying, and that was in order to study the law. You don't have to be dedicated to "someone", but be dedicated to the law/way of life.

This was not Paul's final point of view. Years later when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians, he had changed; for there he uses the relationship of man and wife as a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church (*Ephesians 5:22-26*). When he wrote to the Corinthians, his outlook was dominated by the fact that he expected the Second Coming of Christ at any moment. What he is laying down is crisis legislation. "The time is short." One must concentrate on preparation for the coming. The most important humane activity and the human relationship must be abandoned if they threatened to interrupt or to slacken that concentration. By the time he wrote Ephesians he realized the permanency of the human situation and regarded marriage as the most precious relationship within it, the only one which was even faintly parallel to the relation of Christ and the Church.

For us it must always be true that home is the place which does two things for us. It is the place where we find its noblest opportunity to live the Christian life; and it is a pity that it is so often the place where we claim the right to be as complaining and critical and boorish as we may, and to treat those who love us as we would never dare to treat

a stranger. It should be the place from whose rest and sweetness we draw strength to live more nearly as we ought within the world.

How do we, at our age, look at marriage, and or the change of life situations, and how does it affect us and how do we cope with it in our relationship with God?

Marrying Again (1 Cor. 7:39, 40)

Again Paul takes up his consistent point of view. Marriage is a relationship which can be broken only by death. A second marriage is perfectly allowable, but Paul would rather see the widow stay a widow. We know now that he was speaking only of the crisis situation in which he thought men were living.

In many ways a second marriage is the highest compliment that the one who survives can pay the one who has gone before; for it means that without him/her life was so lonely as to be insupportable; that the married state was so happy that it can fearlessly be entered into again. So far from being an act of disrespect, it can be a mark of honor to the dead.

One condition Paul lays down – it must be a marriage in the Lord. That is, it must be a marriage between Christian folk. It is seldom that a mixed marriage can be successful. The highest love comes when two people love each other and their love is sanctified by a common love of Christ. For then they not only live together, but also pray together; and life and love combine to be one continual act of worship of God.

What does this do to our belief that “marriage” is forever? Does this send anyone who is divorced out as a “non-believer” or a “non-Christian?”

Preamble for Chapters 8 thru 10

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 deals with a problem which may seem extremely remote to us, but was intensely real to the Christians at Corinth and really begged a solution. (Read Barkley's commentary – Pg 71 – 73).

Paul's advice falls into different sections.

- (i) In chapter 8 he lays down the principle that, however safe the strong and enlightened Christian may feel from the infection of heathen idols and even if he believes that an idol is the symbol of something which does not exist at all, he must do nothing which will hurt a brother whose conscience is neither so enlightened nor so.
- (ii) In chapter 9 he deals with those who invoke the principle of Christian freedom. He points out that there are many things that he is free to do which he abstains from doing for the sake of the Church. He is well aware of Christian freedom, but equally aware of Christian responsibility.
- (iii) In chapter 10; 1-13 he deals with those who declare that their Christian knowledge and privileged position make them safe from any infection. He cites the example of the Israelites who had all the privileges of God's Chosen People and who yet fell into sin.
- (iv) In verses 14-22 he uses the argument that any man who has sat at the table of the Lord cannot sit at the table of a heathen god, even if that god be nothing. There is something essentially wrong in taking meat offered to a false god upon lips that have eaten the body and blood of Christ.
- (v) In verses 23-26 he advises against over fussiness. A man can buy what is offered in the shops and ask no questions.
- (vi) In verses 27, 28 he deals with the problem of what to do in a private house. In a private house the Christian will eat what is put before him and ask no questions; *but* if he is deliberately informed that the meat set before him was part of a heathen sacrifice, that is a challenge to his Christian position and he will refuse to eat it.

(vii) Finally in chapter 10:29-11:1 Paul lays down the principle that the conduct of the Christian must be so far above reproach that it gives no possible offence either to Jew or non-Jew. He is better to sacrifice his rights than to allow those rights to become an offence.

Advice To The Wise (I Cor. 8)

It was scarcely possible to live in any Greek city and not to daily come upon the problem of what to do about eating meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to idols. There were certain of the Corinthians to whom the matter was no problem. They held that their superior knowledge had taught them that the heathen gods did not exist, and that therefore it was possible for a Christian to eat meat that had been offered to idols without a qualm of conscience. In reality Paul has two answers to that. One does not come until Chapter 10 verse 20. In that passage Paul makes it clear that, although he agrees that the heathen gods did not exist, he felt certain that the spirits and demons did exist and that they were behind the idols and were using them to seduce men from the worship of the true God.

In the present passage he uses a much simpler argument. He says that in Corinth there were men who all their life – until now – had really believed in the heathen gods; and these men, who were simple souls, could not quite rid themselves of a lingering belief that an idol really was something, although a false something. Whenever they ate meat offered to idols, they had qualms of conscience. They could not help it; instinctively they felt it was wrong. So Paul argues that if you say that there is absolutely no harm in eating this meat offered to idols you are really hurting and bewildering the conscience of these simple souls. His final argument is that, even if a thing is harmless for you, when it hurts someone else, it must be given up, for a Christian must never do anything which causes his brother to stumble.

In this passage which deals with so remote a thing there are three great principles which are valid.

1. What is safe for one man may be unsafe for another. Something may be no temptation to us, but may be a serious temptation to someone

else. Therefore, in considering whether we will or will not do something, we must think not only of the effect on us, but its effect on others as well.

2. Nothing should be judged solely from the point of view of knowledge; everything should be judged from the point of view of love. There is always a certain danger in knowledge. It tends to make a person arrogant and feel superior and thus “look down” on others. Knowledge which does that is not true knowledge. Our conduct not by “superior knowledge” but by sympathetic and considerate love for our fellow man. And it may well be that for his sake we refrain from doing and saying certain otherwise legitimate things.
3. This leads to the greatest truth of all. No man has any right to indulge in a pleasure or demand a liberty which may be the downfall of someone else. He may have the strength to keep a pleasure in its proper place; but he must think of his weaker brother.

Is there anything in our lives (including the past) that was not a problem (safe) for us, but could have been damning to someone else? Does our knowledge of something make it safe for us and all others? Because we can safely do something, is it safe for all others?

The Unclaimed Privileges (I Cor. 9:1-14)

This chapter seems disconnected from what goes before, but in fact it is not. The whole point lies in this – the Corinthians who considered themselves mature Christians have been claiming that they are in such a privileged position that they are free to eat meat offered to idols if they like. Their Christian freedom gives them, - so they thought – a special position in which they - could do things which might not be permissible for lesser men. To answer this Paul sets forth the many privileges he himself had a perfect right to claim, but which he did not, in case they should turn out to be stumbling-blocks to others and prevent the effectiveness of the gospel.

He claims to be an Apostle. He uses two arguments to prove the reality of his apostleship.

- (i) *He has seen the Lord.* Acts makes it clear that the supreme test of an apostle is that he is a witness of the Resurrection.
- (ii) His second claim is that *his ministry has been effective.* The Corinthians were the proof of that. He calls them his *seal*. The seal was the guarantee of genuineness. The Corinthian Church was the guarantee of Paul's apostleship. The final proof that a man knows Christ is that he can bring others to him. The reality of a man's Christianity is proved by the fact that he helps others to be Christian.

A privilege that Paul might have claimed was **support from the Church**. Not only could he have claimed such support for himself, but for a wife. The other apostles received such support. The Greeks despised manual labor. It is true that every Jewish Rabbi was supposed to teach for nothing and to have a trade to earn his daily bread; but they stressed that there was no more meritorious deed than to support a Rabbi. On every ground Paul could have claimed the privilege of being supported by the Church.

Paul uses ordinary human analogies. No soldier has to provide his own rations. Why should the soldier of Christ have to do so? The shepherd of the flock gets his food from the flock. Why should not the Christian pastor do likewise? Paul uses this analogy and applies it to the Christian teacher.

The priest who serves in the Temple receives his share of the offerings (The Burnt-offering; The Sin-offering; The Trespass-offering; The Meat-offering; The Peace-offering). The priests enjoyed still other benefits including sharing in the tithes.

All of this was behind Paul's refusal to accept even the basic supplies of life from the Church for two reasons – 1) The priests were a byword; 2) his sheer independence. Paul was one of those independent souls who would starve rather than be beholden to anyone.

In the end, one thing dominated his conduct. He would do nothing to discredit or hinder the gospel. Paul was determined that his hands would be clean.

How do we look at our “pastor” and/or ourselves as “pastor?” How do we support our pastor and ourselves as teachers?

The Privilege And The Task (I Cor. 9:15-23)

This passage is sort of an outline of Paul’s whole conception of his ministry.

- 1) He looks at it as a *privilege*. The one thing he will not do is take money for working for Christ. It means that a man should never work primarily for money. He should regard his work not as a career of accumulation, but as an opportunity of service. It is a privilege to serve others for God’s sake.
- 2) He regarded it as a *duty*. Paul’s point of view was that if he had chosen to be a preacher of the gospel he might legitimately have demanded payment for his work; but he had not chosen the work; it had chosen him.
- 3) Paul knew that he received daily a *great reward*. He had the satisfaction of bringing the gospel freely to all men who would receive it. That is why the biggest thing in life is not to choose the job with the biggest pay, but the one in which we will find the greatest satisfaction.
- 4) Finally, Paul speaks about *the method of his ministry*, which was to become all things to all men. The man who can never see anything but his own point of view and who never makes any attempt to understand the mind and heart of other, will never make a pastor or even a friend.

How do we see our “ministry?” Do we require others to conform to our way of seeing and loving Christ? Are we “all things to all?”

A Real Fight (I Cor. 9:24-27)

Paul takes another line. He insists to those Corinthians who wanted to take the easy way out that no man will ever get anywhere without self-discipline. Paul was always fascinated by the image of the athlete. An athlete must train with intensity if he is to win his contest;

for a laurel crown that will wither in a few days. How much more should the Christian discipline himself to win the crown which is eternal life.

In this passage Paul sets out a kind of brief philosophy of life.

- 1) Life is a battle. We must regard ourselves always as men engaged upon a campaign, as men pressing onwards to a goal.
- 2) To win the fight and to be victorious in the race demands discipline.
 - a. We have to discipline our bodies; often spiritual depression springs from physical unfitness.
 - b. We have to discipline our minds; we can never solve problems by refusing to see them or by running away from them.
 - c. We must discipline our souls; face life's sorrows with endurance, its temptations with the strength God gives, its disappointments with courage.
- 3) We need to know our goal. A distressing thing is the obvious aimlessness of the lives of so many people; they are drifting anywhere instead of going somewhere. And to go just anywhere is the certain way to arrive nowhere.
- 4) We need to know the worth of our goal. The goal is *life*, and surely it is worth anything to win that.
- 5) We cannot save others unless we master ourselves. We cannot teach what we do not know; we cannot bring others to Christ until we ourselves have found him.

How well are we “equipped” to achieve our goal? In what area are we weak? What can/should we do to strengthen that area(s)?

The Peril Of Over-Confidence (I Cor. 10:1-13)

In this chapter Paul is still dealing with the question of eating meat offered to idols. The Corinthian Christians' point of view was “We are baptized – one with Christ; received the Body and Blood of Christ – one with Him; therefore we are safe and can eat meat offered to idols and not be harmed.” So Paul warns of the danger of over-confidence.

Paul points to history to show what can happen to people who have been blessed with the greatest privileges. He goes back to the days when the children of Israel were wandering in the desert. In verse 5 Paul speaks of them drinking of the rock which followed them.

The history of Israel shows that people who enjoyed the great privileges of God were far from being safe from temptation; special privilege, Paul reminds the Corinthians is no guarantee of security.

Note the temptations and failures which Paul singles out.

- 1) There is the temptation to idolatry. Men can still worship the works of their own hands more than they worship God.
- 2) There is the temptation to fornication. As long as man is a man, temptations come from his lower self. Only a passionate love of purity can save him from impurity.
- 3) There is the temptation to try God too far. At the back of his mind there is the idea, "It will be OK, God will forgive." We must remember that there is a holiness as well as a love of God.
- 4) There is the temptation to grumble. There are still many who greet life with a shine and not with a cheer.

So Paul insists on the need of vigilance. "Let him who thinks he stands secure take care lest he fall." How many fortresses have fallen because its defenders thought that it was impregnable?

Paul concludes this section by saying three things about temptation:

- 1) He is sure that temptation will come. That is part of life.
- 2) Any temptation that comes is not unique. Others have endured it and others have come through it. When we go thru temptation, we are going thru what others have gone thru and endured and conquered.
- 3) With the temptation there is always a way of escape. No man has to fall to any temptation, for with it there is a way out, and the way out is not the way surrender nor of retreat, but the way of conquest in the power and grace of God.

How have we dealt with and overcome temptation?

The Sacramental Obligation (I Cor. 10:14-22)

The Limits of Christian Freedom (I Cor. 10:23 – 11:1)

The Necessary Modesty (I Cor. 11:2-16)

The Wrong Kind of Feast (I Cor. 11:17-22)

The Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:23-34)