

Paul's First Letter to The Corinthians Lesson 1

¹ **1 Cor. 1:1** Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
² to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter is written to all the saints in the church at Corinth. Corinth is a city on the isthmus that joins Peloponnesus to the mainland of the country of Greece. It is about 48 miles from the famous city of Athens. In Paul's day, Corinth was a fairly new city. It was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. About 36 BC a colony of freedmen from Rome began rebuilding it. The city in Paul's day was a mix of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. Paul visited the city in 51-52 AD, on his second missionary journey and stayed there for about 18 months. This visit is recorded in Acts 18.



This is the city where Paul first met and became close friends with Aquila and Priscilla, a couple who would allow churches to be established in their homes in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome.

A little later, Paul would visit Corinth and remain for about 3 months, according to Acts 20:3. During this second short visit to Corinth, Paul would write his incredible letter to the church in Rome in the year 55 AD.

The church in Corinth was a mixture of Gentiles and Jewish converts, yet the Gentiles far outnumbered the Jews.

While in Ephesus, Paul heard of the abuse and contention in Corinth from his friend Apollos. Later he received a letter from the family of Chloe, from Stephanas, and two other friends. The sheer multitude of reports convinced Paul that he had to address the multiple issues in Corinth. From Ephesus Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians to check the factious spirit and correct all the erroneous beliefs and opinions in Corinth, as well as the disorderly conduct and many abuses.

In this letter Paul will deal head on with the issues at hand, exposing the great problems in the church at Corinth.

¹ **1 Cor. 1:4** I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Reminder – Paul opens the letter with a reminder of how the church began. They had started right with the grace of God and all that was promised them because of that grace. The grace of God:

1. Enriched their speech and knowledge,
2. Confirmed their position in Christ,
3. Provided them with everything they needed,
4. Gave the hope of the revelation,
5. Would confirm them at the end,

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6. Would present them as blameless on the day of the Lord.

Paul also reminds them that God, who promised these things because of His grace, is faithful to provided them, just as He promised.

1 Cor. 1:¹⁰ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's *people*, that there are quarrels among you. ¹² Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ that no man should say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void.

The Divisions - It seems that personality cults had begun in Corinth with varied allegiances to the different preachers who had come through the church. The focuses of their allegiances were wrong! Their focus should have only been on Christ and Christ alone. Never should your allegiance be to the pastors of the church but to Christ who is the church. If your allegiance is to the pastors, you will be disappointed and divisions and quarrels will come. When allegiances are not on Christ and Christ alone, His purpose is void and useless in your lives. This should never be! Paul wants the Corinthians to be of the same mind in Christ and therefore under the same judgment. Paul's purpose was to preach the gospel and not to sway people and bring division with cleverness of speech.

1 Cor. 1:¹⁸ For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The Problem of Cleverness of Speech - The full focus of Paul was to preach the gospel. He did not lace his preaching with all manner of philosophy and professional rhetoric; he just preached the gospel. Forget not that in those days the school of Alexandria was touting a method of oratorical speech that tickled the ears of the listener, yet presented little substance. They were performers and word jugglers, quite entertaining to be exact. These same skills were being used and incorporated by the preachers to bring popularity to themselves and, whether intentionally or not, focus and loyalty to themselves rather than Christ. Preaching, as in Paul's definition of the word, was much different than the rhetorical beauty of the clever speech. Paul simple preached the facts about the death of Christ on the Cross, His burial, and His resurrection as the gospel. He did not embellish the facts, nor did he cover any of the details to make them more palatable to anyone. The gospel was the gospel that needed to be preached! To many people, the facts of the gospel were foolishness. To others, the facts of the gospel brought eternal life. Those who were trying to be clever with the gospel message or even with the pulpit of the church were causing divisions within the church. Their wisdom and cleverness was no wisdom at all. There are both Gentiles and Jews who see little wisdom in the facts of the gospel message. Yet for those who will place their lives in the substance of its message, God grants them the gift of grace which far outshines the wisdom and strength on man.

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1 Cor. 1:²⁶For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, ²⁹that no man should boast before God. ³⁰But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

The Foolish Things of the World - Paul says that there were not many "wise ... mighty ... noble." The words actually mean "men of philosophy ... men of dignity and strength ... men of aristocracy." The Corinthians would have clearly understood Paul's meaning in this phrase. The Corinthians could look around at themselves and where they had come from and the church had very few members who neither possessed a philosophical mind, or held positions of government and legislative power, nor were there many who were from the royal blood lines of the country. To these three classes, the gospel was foolish.

Notice Paul's words. "the foolish things ... shame the wise, the weak things ... shame the strong, things that are not ... nullify the things that are, ... that no man should boast before God." Using rhetoric to powerfully prove his point, each paradox is completely compared to show that God is all that is need to complete a person in the true wisdom of God which brings righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. In Paul's teaching, the only place to boast is in the Lord!

1 Cor. 2:¹And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ²For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

The Power of God – Paul was very aware that every bit of his power was from the Lord. In his former life, before the Damascus Road calling, he relied totally on his own abilities to bring about change in his surroundings, birthing fear in the hearts of the Jews he sought to persecute. After giving his life to the Lord, his personal demeanor was meek and humble. Paul simply delivered the simple facts of the gospel and it was the power of God that brought about the change in the lives he touched. Nothing was done with fancy, clever, persuasive words. In fact, Paul was fearful and trembling in each instance that he would be used as the instrument of the gospel but not the focus of the gospel.

1 Cor. 2:⁶Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; ⁷but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom*, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; ⁸*the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; ⁹but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND *which* HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." ¹⁰For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, ¹³which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. ¹⁴But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

¹⁵But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. ¹⁶For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE SHOULD INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

God's Wisdom in a Mystery – Continuing with the thought of the gospel of Christ crucified, Paul calls this “God’s Wisdom in a mystery” that is not understood by the world, its rulers, or the generation alive in that day, yet it was predestined by God before the creation of the world. Paul makes a sharp distinction in two points. First, it is God’s wisdom and not the wisdom of this age. Every generation of the world has a conceit of its own and this is especially true of the twenty-first century. But the wisdom of God is eternal and superior to all the wisdom of any age at any time, for God’s wisdom is absolute.

Second, it is not the mere self-consciousness of God that reveals this mystery, but it is the personal Holy Spirit in His relationship to God the Father and God the Son. In Paul’s analogy of the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, Paul makes it clear that God’s Holy Spirit is amply qualified to make the revelations of Christ crucified to all who will hear.

Man, in his worldliness, simply cannot understand the spiritual things of God. It is impossible! Yet, for the spiritually minded man, the things of God are clearly understood.

^{1 Cor. 3:}¹And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. ²I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? ⁴For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not *mere* men? ⁵What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Babes in Christ - When Paul established the church in Corinth, he could not speak to them in spiritual talk because they were babes in Christ, new Christians, who could not understand the deep things of God. When it came time for Paul to leave the Corinthian church, mature leaders were either left there or brought in to continue maturing the Corinthians in Christ. This is a perfect example of mistakes that are made in the church today. Often a very respected business man will come to the Lord and immediately be placed on a committee in the church to help with the finances or personnel. While he is a Christian, and while he is a very respected business man, he is still a babe in Christ. He does not understand fully the things of the Lord and how the Lord operates. His worldly background tempers his committee work and not his theology because it is impossible for a babe in Christ to have a solid theology. Things are said in the committee meeting that just do not make sense to the business man and he begins to question Christ. Such was the same for Paul and his relationship to the Corinthians. It was impossible for them to have a mature theology to follow because they were mere babes in Christ. The quarrels and divisions in the Corinthian church just proved the immaturity of the members of the church. Their allegiances to the different preachers proved their immaturity. Paul was pressing them to maturity in God.

^{1 Cor. 3:}¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is *to be* revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.

¹⁵If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

The Foundation and the Building of the Church - The foundation of the church is Christ alone. No other foundation is a true foundation. Yet, Christ sends preachers with His messages to build upon the foundation. Paul laid the foundation in Corinth of Christ Crucified! All the other preachers who came along did so to build upon that foundation; however, it is clear from the context of this letter that there must have been some preachers, or those who aspired to be preachers, who did not present a message that built upon the true foundation. Let the work of that preacher be tested by fire to reveal its truth. That which remains is the true building according to Christ.

Notice also that Paul addresses the person whose work is burned up, yet he does not lose his salvation. The babe in Christ is seen in this example. As we grow, we make mistakes and travel roads of theology where questions can lead us in the wrong direction. The Christian is to learn from those questions and mature in a proper theology that can stand the test of fire.

¹ **1 Cor. 3:**¹⁶Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?

¹⁷If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

The Temple of God – We are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in us and because of that we are holy (set apart – different). The Corinthians did not understand this concept. They needed to learn this fact and in doing so, they would mature in the Lord. It is a dangerous thing to tamper with the temple of God and the Corinthians were guilty of this fact.

¹⁸Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "*He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS*"; ²⁰and again, "*THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS.*" ²¹So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, ²³and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

The Wisdom of the World - The greatest wisdom of the world is still foolishness before the wisdom of God. God sees through the heart and mind of every man, knowing what they think, his hidden motivations and reasons, and his utter uselessness in God's economy. Notice the three tiers of true knowledge, "all things belong to you, you belong to Christ, Christ belongs to God." Remember, these Corinthian Christians are struggling with the pressures of the world and the righteous life in Christ. Paul is making the point that in that present time, all things in the world were available to the Christian to use in its proper place and time, just as the Christian was available to be used by Christ who was available to be used by God. This is maturity in Christ! Therefore preachers, like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas are servants of Christ and not a cultic leader of a sect of Christianity.

¹ **1 Cor. 4:**¹Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. ³But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by *any* human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. ⁴For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. ⁵Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

The Stewards of the Mysteries of God – Trustworthiness is important to Paul and he is more than ready for the Corinthian church to examine his teaching, his heart, his motive, his life, and

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his purpose. Trustworthy preachers are to be regarded as stewards of the mysteries of God. The steward was the house manager. He was a slave under the owner of the house but even as a slave he was the master over the other slaves of the house. In this case, the preacher was the overseer of all, the under-owner of Christ in a position of great dignity. Jesus has entrusted the mysteries of the kingdom to all of His disciples. As stewards, the preachers are expected to teach God's mysteries to the church.

1 Cor. 4:⁶Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. ⁷For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? ⁸You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and / would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. ⁹For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. ¹¹To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; ¹²and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; ¹³when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now.

Paul and Apollos – All that Paul has said to the Corinthians thus far in the letter was to prove that Paul and Apollos were on the same page with Lord and that Apollos had no desire to be greater than Paul, and Paul had no desire to be greater than Apollos. It was the Corinthian Church that had made the division and caused the quarrels. The cause of Christ was not an easy road for the preachers of the gospel in those days. As you can see from Paul's explanation of his current circumstances, they were suffering greatly for the privileged of being the stewards of the mystery of God.

1 Cor. 4:¹⁴I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet *you would not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. ¹⁷For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. ¹⁸Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. ²⁰For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. ²¹What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

The Purpose of Timothy Going to Corinth with this Letter - Paul has just presented the deployable conditions that he and Apollos, as well as many others are suffering under in Ephesus. In Corinth, the church members are basking in the wealth of the seaport. Is Paul trying to shame the Corinthians? No! Paul is trying to encourage the Corinthians to grow in their faith. Notice that Paul says that the Corinthians will have many teachers in Christ, yet they only have one earthly father in the gospel and it was Paul. They knew Paul's demeanor and life in Christ and as their father in the gospel Paul implored them to imitate him because he was imitating Christ.

Paul was sending his faithful son in the faith to instruct them. Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus to mature them in the faith. Now Paul is sending him with this letter to the Corinthian church to mature them in the faith. Timothy will be able to teach them, not specifically in words, but in the power of Christ who lives in him. Timothy was a major part of Paul's ministry. Sent ahead, Timothy would strive to correct the problems in the church so that when Paul arrived, he could simply love on the church in the spirit with great gentleness.

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