

A Study of First Corinthians

Week Two

1 Corinthians 2:1-3:9

Day One

2:1 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

vs. 1&2 – Paul came to Corinth after his trip to Athens (see Acts 17:16-34). Many believe his address to the Athenian philosophers was a masterful one, yet Paul had few converts to show for it. So he came to Corinth a bit wounded but wiser and determined not to try and reach these Greeks on their own philosophical debating terms, but in the power of preaching Christ and the cross.

I wonder what Paul would think of the evangelism conducted today. It seems at times that we do resort to eloquence and superior wisdom as we try to “win souls,” feeling that the ends justifies the means. I have been guilty of this strategy as well. We have seen that the focus of Paul’s work was Christ and his evangelism focused on the same.

v. 3 – It would be good to read Acts 18, which tells the account of Paul’s work in Corinth. When he first arrived, he was alone and had his Athens failures to think about. He started out in the synagogue, as was his custom, but soon encountered his usual persecution and had to withdraw. We are then told:

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:9-11).

If the Lord told Paul not to be afraid, he probably already was! Perhaps he was thinking of backing off, becoming less aggressive and not sharing the testimony that he bore. The Lord encouraged Paul and urged him to keep on doing what he was sent to do—speak the truth. Paul was obedient, but must have been in constant anxiety over his work and effectiveness. The Lord told Paul that He had many people in Corinth. These people had not yet come to Jesus, yet the Lord considered them His own, called for His purpose.

What are you afraid of? Have you let fear hinder you from doing something that God wants you to do? God wants to encourage you today, just like He did Paul. The Lord did not appear only to encourage Paul, but to keep Paul working at the purpose for which God had sent him to Corinth. God will encourage you today, but only to do His work—not just to make you feel better.

vs. 4&5 – Someone once said that the way you catch someone for Jesus is the way they must be maintained. Paul knew this and didn't want to "capture" them for Jesus by using clever speech. Instead he wanted them to see the power of God, probably expressed through miracles, so that their faith would focus on God and not him or his teaching. Paul knew that he would eventually leave, but the Spirit would stay. So he anchored the Corinthians' faith to the power of the Spirit.

When I help people clarify their purpose, I try to do the same. I never tell them what it is, but rather try to help them "hear" God. If they can do that, then the God who showed them their purpose will also help them fulfill it, without my help.

Day Two

6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

v. 6 – This is so true. Believers speak a wisdom that is from God, a wisdom that the world system rejects as weak and foolish. Yet we know that is the superior wisdom. Once in while, I will read a book by a Buddhist. It has the sound of wisdom, but often it leaves me confused, feeling like an animal going in circles, chasing its tail. And don't even mention Hinduism. My eyes cross and I get a headache when I encounter its so-called wisdom. The most dangerous wisdom for me, however, is the wisdom my culture offers, wisdom that is close and familiar to me and presented in my language and with symbols I understand. I must work harder to weed out that wisdom, for it can sound so good but leads to nothingness, as Paul pointed out.

v. 7 – Paul was referring, of course, to Jesus and the wisdom of God revealed in His life, death and resurrection. That isn't what the world system had in mind at all and it still doesn't. The world preaches power, wealth and selfishness. The Kingdom of God preaches service, giving and selflessness. There is no common ground between the two. Perhaps this was best revealed in the book of Daniel, where Daniel had nothing in common with the wise men of Babylon. Daniel trusted God, while the wise men trusted in themselves and their ability to figure out their gods.

v. 8 – The rulers of this age must have included the Jewish leaders, who certainly had the Scriptures, but did not understand the meaning of what they read. They too had bought into a worldly wisdom that said the Messiah would come and reestablish the literal throne of David and throw off the Romans using military force. So religious leaders can be just as much a part of the world system as political or military leaders. Just because someone talks about the things of God doesn't mean they understand how God works and what His methods are.

The world system's leaders came to the conclusion that, if they killed Jesus, they would be done with Him. Instead the wisdom of God allowed that killing Jesus would allow God to raise Him to life so that His work would carry on in the power of the Spirit. Paul saw here, again probably after his confrontation and failure in Athens, that his message and work had no common ground with the Greek mind or system. He had to focus on Christ and Him crucified and not try to find any link or bridge to the bankrupt philosophies of Greece.

Have you come to the same conclusion? Do you see that we have nothing in common with the world, that we cannot build bridges of friendship or dialogue? We serve a risen Lord whose life and commands are diametrically opposed to everything that the world holds dear.

Day Three

9 However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"— 10 but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

v. 9 – Paul referred to Isaiah 64:4 here, and the temptation is to apply this verse to the future glories of the Church and believer. But this isn't a future promise. This promise belongs to now! Why do I say that? Look at the next verse.

v. 10 – Paul wrote that God has revealed it to us now. What is the it? It is the wisdom of Jesus, of God's love expressed through the incarnation of His only Son to live and die among us, only to be raised to newness of life as the firstfruits of all who shall rise. There is no human mind or wisdom that could have conceived of such a plan, nor is there any human mind that can comprehend or appreciate it. It is something that only the spiritually-enlightened may understand and that enlightenment is a gift of God. No one can earn it or arrive at it on their own merits.

Do you live like Isaiah 64:4 has already been fulfilled in your life? Do you see the eternal value of God's wisdom in your life? Have you stopped thanking God for His immeasurable grace in Jesus that is bestowed upon you?

Paul went on to introduce a theme that carried throughout the rest of his letter and that is the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of God in man. Paul went on to say that the Spirit searches all things, and it is this Spirit that has revealed God's plan of salvation that is so repugnant to Greek and Jew. Remember the context here that no man can comprehend the things of God. The Corinthians were not dealing with a man-made "system," but a work that comes from God's mind and counsel.

vs. 11&12 – Since we are dealing with the Spirit, we can be sure that we are dealing with the thoughts of God. I am impressed by the confidence of Paul and all the apostles. These were men who were raised in the Jewish tradition and they were convinced that they were dealing with the things of God. There was no wavering, no unbelief, no second-guessing. They had seen Jesus, they had beheld God and now they were carrying on the work of God’s Spirit that had begun with Abraham and had run through the prophets.

These men gave their lives for the cause that they served and promoted. This wasn’t some casual life philosophy. For them, it was the work of God, worthy of their life investment. This is the tradition that you and I have received. **Are you ready to serve that work of the Spirit in your lifetime as they were in theirs? You aren’t just dealing with an intellectually or culturally superior way of life. You have inherited the gifts of God in Jesus. What impact has that made on your life and work? What are you doing to pass that down to the generations yet to come?**

Day Four

13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

v. 13 – What a bold statement! What confidence in God! Paul said that the Spirit gave them the words and wisdom that they had passed to the Corinthians. Paul didn’t “come up with” what he taught. This wasn’t another Greek philosophy such as the Stoics or Epicureans taught. Paul declared the word of God as the Spirit had taught him, not as man. I now see why Paul deemed it so important that he had received his revelation of the gospel to the Gentiles apart from the other apostles:

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:15-17).

He wanted those who received his word that he had not bought into someone else’s program or been convinced by some seminar or school of thought. What Paul received, he received directly from God in the prophetic tradition of his people. And now he was passing what he had received on to the Corinthians. This was not a matter to be taken lightly.

v. 14 – The role of the Spirit in my life is comprehensive. He reveals God’s truths and helps me understand them as well. Without the Spirit, God’s truth is incomprehensible to

me. Oh Spirit of God, show me the ways of God. Help to comprehend His truth. I need you. You need Him, too.

v. 15 – It seems that Paul is saying that a spiritual man cannot be judged by a natural man; that is the context of what has been saying in the letter so far. This, of course, pertains to matters of God and salvation. It doesn't pertain to all of life, but to the spiritual things that Paul had written about up to that point. We expect the world to say that the Christian life and values are crazy; they cannot comprehend until the Spirit of God helps them to see. That isn't arrogant or elitist; it's simply the facts.

v. 16 – Of course, the answer to the question is “no one.” No one can know the mind of God in such a manner that they can presume to counsel God. We as believers have the mind of Christ; therefore, we cannot waver from the truth that God has revealed to us. It wasn't something we figured out and it isn't open to debate, additions or deletions. It is the mind of God, which we received just like Paul did—in the power of the Spirit.

The natural mind can conceive of and receive Jesus as a good man, prophet, moral teacher and philosopher. It cannot receive Him as risen Lord.

I was always a good student and was told early on that I had a good mind. I have found that at times that good mind has gotten me into trouble as I've served the Lord. The answer to my problem was not, however, to switch off my mind, but rather to bring it under the Lordship of Jesus. I had to be careful not to exalt my mind over the Word or God's ways. And that has allowed me to become more effective, I believe, in my service to God. **How about you? Have you stopped using your mind or have you submitted it a higher authority, continuing to grow in the wisdom and the knowledge of God?**

Day Five

3:1 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

v. 1 – Even though the Corinthians had walked with the Lord for a few years, Paul considered them infants. Why? Because their thinking was bad. Their perspectives were skewed, and they had allowed their walk to become trivialized by their lack of unity. Do you know any infants in Christ, those who have known the Lord for years, but haven't grown? That is part of why I went back to school at 37 years of age. I wanted to grow in my knowledge of God, but not just so I could be knowledgeable. I wanted to be productive. Are you productive?

I have noticed too that some times when believers know a lot, they get mean. They begin to think that they are God's protectors and the defenders of the faith and Word. I don't want to be like that. Ultimately my “knowledge” is to make me more like Jesus. Otherwise I will be a knowledgeable infant, who can't be trusted or entrusted with much.

v. 2 – Paul had high expectations for the Corinthians. They had no spiritual history and had not known the Lord for 10 years, but he expected them to further along than they were. We should have high expectations as well for ourselves and for those with whom we work and minister. I have known believers who have followed the Lord and were impotent. I have also known three-year-old Christians who were productive and growing.

Think of it: the apostles were with Jesus for a little more than three years. Soon thereafter, they were addressing the leaders of their day in the power of the Spirit. Too often people look to Old Testament role models like Moses, who spent 40 years on the backside of the desert getting ready to do God’s work. The New Testament model is much different. **What are you doing with the years that you have walked with the Lord? May I suggest that, if it is nothing else than faithful attendance at church, you are a baby Christian!**

v. 3 – Jealousy is a powerful deterrent from being productive in God’s will. Here is what James, the brother of Jesus, had to say about that issue:

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14-16).

The antidote to selfish ambition is service and humility, both of which are a choice, not a feeling. I have had to face my own selfish ambition in the ministry for many years and it isn’t pretty. I have also seen it even in many well-known ministers, who agonized when anyone else got “ahead” of them in public ministry.

Day Six

4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? 5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

v. 4 – While this probably sounded spiritual to the Corinthians that they each had their favorite teacher who had influenced them and to whom they were loyal, Paul saw it as carnal and unspiritual. This reduced them to “mere men” and Paul wanted them to be more than that. He wanted them to be spiritual men. I am a follower of Jesus. Formerly, I identified with my spiritual movement and leaders more than did my Master, but I have repented and will never let that happen again. When it did happen, it made me a mere man, and I want to be more than a mere man. I want to be like Jesus.

v. 5 – We see a clue that they became “followers” of those who had led them to Jesus. Paul would not overlook this issue. He had to correct it for, as I’ve pointed out on

numerous occasions, Jesus was supreme in Paul's life, thinking and ministry. I would think that Paul would react to some of the denominationalism of the modern church. I'm not sure he would have opposed it (some would think so), but he would have objected to denominational loyalty over loyalty to the Word and Jesus. **Ask yourself where your loyalties and commitment lie. Is it with Jesus or with the group to which you belong? Don't answer to quickly. Pray and ask the Lord to show you.**

v. 6 – Paul and Apollos played an important role in the Corinthian church. One planted, another watered. It was God, however, who gave the life and growth. Therefore Paul gave God the glory and premier position in his life and work. I wish that some modern servants of God would get this revelation. Perhaps they would not hold their people or theological positions with such a strong hand. The church, especially in North America, is very personality driven. This is good marketing for those who have media ministries. But I would argue that it is dangerous and in a sense, unbliblical. **Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?**

Day Seven

7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

v. 7 – Well, this certainly puts things in perspective. Paul stated that the one who planted and the one who watered are nothing significant, only servants of the One who makes it all grow. That will certainly deal with any ego problems among leaders. Unfortunately, this isn't always taught, especially in newer churches where the founding pastor is still present.

I was recently listening to a message and the announcer began by introducing the speaker, saying "This church is founded on the ministry gift of this founding pastor." I thought, "Really?", because I thought of what Paul wrote elsewhere:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

I was talking with a pastor the other day who didn't think this was a big deal. We were talking about a church where the pastor and his wife have large portraits of themselves hanging next to the entrance to the sanctuary. What do you think? Is this a "big deal" or not? I am overreacting? Feel free to send your comments to me either way. I am truly open on this topic.

v. 8 – In the Old Testament, Levi was the only tribe who did not receive any land as an inheritance. Why?

The LORD said to Aaron, "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites" (Numbers 18:20).

It seems that the Levites and God's workers received a special reward—the Lord Himself. It is nice to be honored and rewarded by the people a leader serves, but it is better to receive the inheritance and reward from God Himself. I am less interested in titles and honor from the people than I have ever been. I am keen, however, to receive the blessing the Lord has for me, which may not be fully manifest until the age to come. If so, I can wait, trusting that my labor in Him is not in vain.

v. 9 – The building belongs to God as do the workers who built it. The builders have in no way paid as high a price as the owner, Jesus Christ. We did not shed our blood striving against sin. We did not become the incarnate Word of God and empty ourselves to take on the form of a servant. Whatever I do, whatever gifts I have, I owe it all to Jesus. My efforts and sacrifices are nothing compared to His.

It is my opinion that this is a serious matter in the Church today. I think there are some leaders who have exalted themselves and the people have exalted them beyond what is proper. But that is my opinion and I may be wrong. I welcome your comments even if you disagree, for I may be biased on this issue, not being a "lead man." If I am off base, feel free to set me straight.