

1 Corinthians Study

by

The Rev. Paul N. Walker and
The Rev. Dr. Justin S. Holcomb

Christ Episcopal Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

www.christchurchville.org

Studies in 1 Corinthians

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:5-6

Today the church has many problems. Some of them are small, and we can afford to take them in stride as we focus on other things. But the church also has some very large problems that it needs to address directly and immediately. One of the big problems that plagues the church is disunity. As we look around, we count thousands of denominations, and see great disunity even among many of those denominations. In individual churches, we see strife over building programs and mission statements. People divide over minor theological issues, and even create division over personal incompatibility. Sometimes church politics cause factions within our ranks, and sometimes we stir up trouble without having any readily identifiable excuse.

These are exactly the kinds of problems Paul encountered in first-century Corinth. But unlike us, Paul saw the disunity caused by these problems as a terrible disaster. He was so worried about the divisions in Corinth that he barely got through saying "hello" before he launched into the problems. Paul actually told the Corinthians that their divisions were contrary to the gospel itself.

What Paul offered to the Corinthians was that they refocus their attention on Christ, and on the blessings they had received in him — including their fellowship with one another. This is the same message we need today. By focusing our attention on ourselves instead of on Christ, and on our disagreements rather than on common blessings, we will fail to encounter the unity and fellowship of being the people of God.

Week 1	Overview	
Week 2	1 Cor 1:1-9	Blameless?
Week 3	1 Cor 1:18-2:5	The Foolishness of the Cross
Week 4	1 Cor 3:16-4:5	Who are You?
Week 5	1 Cor 5:1-3 and 6:12-20	Sex and the City...of God
Week 6	1 Cor 7:17-24	The Given Life
Week 7	1 Cor 8:1-13	Humility, Love, and "the Weaker Brother"
Week 8	1 Cor 9:1-6, 15-23	The Christian Right?
Week 9	1 Cor 10:1-13	Temptation and the Grace of God
Week 10	1 Cor 13:1-13	Love
Week 11	1 Cor 15	Resurrection

Week 1: Overview

"First" Corinthians was actually the second letter that Paul had written to the Church at Corinth (5:9). The first, as best we can tell, was badly misunderstood by the Corinthians. Therefore, Paul wrote them another letter clarifying his previous letter. He had received reports from friends (1:11) who had been in Corinth, including questions they had and problems they were experiencing. This letter is Paul's response to those questions (see chapters 7 and 8). Paul, with this letter, was trying to help encourage and lead a church that was going astray.

The Corinthians did not like Paul at all and challenged his authority and desired "more than" the gospel. Paul is responding to this desire for "more than" the gospel.

Outline of 1 Corinthians

- I. Divisions in the Church (1 Cor 1–4)
- II. Immorality in the Church (1 Cor 5–6)
- III. Answering Questions (1 Cor 7–8)
- IV. Christian Freedom (1 Cor 9–10)
- V. Worship (1 Cor 11–14)
- VI. Reminder of the Gospel (1 Cor 15)
- VII. Closing Remarks (1 Cor 16)

Date

Paul started the church at Corinth in the latter part of 49 AD, ministering there for 18 months before he continued on his missionary journeys. Other apostles visited Corinth and ministered to the saints there, and the Corinthians began to appreciate these men more than Paul, their absent founder. Therefore Paul began communicating to them through letters toward the end of his ministry in Ephesus, probably in early 55 AD.

Location

Corinth was a very large and wealthy port city throughout its history, being located very strategically in the area that joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland of Greece. However, it was destroyed by Rome in 146 BC and not rebuilt until 29 BC. It quickly regained its wealth and popularity, but with a completely new class of people. The city was so infamous for its sexual impropriety that "to Corinthianize" became the slang for having sex. In the letter, it is obvious that some of this kind of behavior crept into the church.

Themes

Freedom from Sin—The Corinthian Church rationalized their own sinfulness by presuming upon God's grace and pridefully assuming God's favor. Paul, conversely, tells them that God has freed his people from slavery to sin so that they might be free from its destruction and free to love others rather than self.

Unity and Peace: The Corinthian church had split itself through factions and arguments. Different groups claimed different church leaders, and brothers litigated against brother in the Roman court system. Paul chastises the Corinthians for their selfishness and pride, which was jeopardizing the unity of Christ's body and Christ's testimony to the world (chapters 1, 3, 7, 11).

Author

The apostle Paul wrote this letter. He was not one of the original twelve and was formerly named Saul (Acts 13:9). Paul had formerly been a zealous Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5) and persecuted the church (Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 22:3-4; 26:9-11; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:14,23; Phil. 3:5). He was converted and appointed to his apostleship by direct encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). Paul was one of the church's earliest missionaries, and was especially commissioned to evangelize the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 15:12; 18:6; 22:21; Gal. 2:9). He planted churches all over the Mediterranean world and authored more New Testament books than any other writer: Romans; 1 & 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 & 2 Thessalonians; 1 & 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon.

Summary of 1 Corinthians

The letter was probably written circa A.D. 54-56 from Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey. Paul wrote to the church in the city of Corinth, the capital city of the Roman province Achaia. Paul had planted this church during his second missionary journey only a few years earlier. The original audience in Corinth contained members from all levels of society, but consisted mostly of people who were neither rich, wise, nor of noble birth. The original audience had sat under the ministry of Paul, Apollos, and Peter.

Subsequent to the ministries of Paul, Apollos, and Peter, the Corinthian church had begun to place improper value on worldly wisdom, including Greek philosophy. Paul wrote the letter largely to discuss the problems he saw in the Corinthian church, although he also included praise for certain things the church was doing well.

Questions

1. How do you define "the gospel" or grace?
2. How would you describe the gospel and what does desiring "more than" the gospel look like in your life and in the contemporary church?
3. Paul wanted the Corinthians to refocus their attention on Christ and on the blessings they had received in him. What are some of the blessings received in Christ? What are the blessings from Christ that all Christians can celebrate?
4. A key passage in 1 Corinthians is Paul's purpose statement for writing. 1 Cor 4:5-6 "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." What are your thoughts about this passage?

Week 2: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Theme: Blameless? Substitutionary Atonement and Imputation = Grace

Jesus Christ is your substitute. He died the death you deserved and he gave you the life and righteousness that is his. This is the chief theme of Scripture and the power of the gospel in people's lives. Atonement ("He died for me for the forgiveness of my sin") and Imputation ("His righteousness is imputed—given, credited, applied—to me no matter what I do") are at the heart of "**Grace**" (v.3) Grace is God's forgiving and loving posture towards His creatures. Remember the famous candlestick scene in *Les Miserables*? We see this in verse 8 – through the atonement and imputed righteousness of Christ we are and will be "*guiltless*" in the Day of Judgment. And, as verse 9 tells us, all this is God's work, not ours. He called us and "*God is faithful*" to His word.

Les Miserables is the story of grace and mercy so close to the gospel that Christians for years have seen the gospel in its story. At one point in the story, the protagonist, Jean Valjean steals a pair of candlesticks from the local bishop. It is a scene of evil and desperation. The authorities soon catch up to Jean Valjean and bring him before the bishop. His life is over. His crime will bring him death. The bishop is brought out and the authorities lay their accusation upon Jean Valjean. Before the authorities can accuse Jean Valjean, however, the bishop speaks up. "Jean," he says, "you forgot the plates and bowls that I was going to give you as well!" Perplexed, the authorities are left without a case. They end up retreating, not having convicted their criminal. Left alone, the bishop turns to Jean Valjean. "I have bought you, now, Jean Valjean. Now I lay claim to you." The rest of *Les Miserables* is the narrative of Jean Valjean, bought with a price, living out the calling which the bishop gave to him. Welcome to the wonderful life of the Christian. You have been bought with a price and your life is now not your own. Though you were a criminal, now you are the servant of the great King, Jesus. He has provided all you ever imagined in accomplishing your redemption. Now that he has given all to buy us, we are not our own.

Quotes

"The concept of substitution is at the heart of both sin and salvation. The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone." - John Stott

"Every little touch would hurt my conscience. But one day, as I was passing through a field, suddenly I thought of a sentence, "your righteousness is in heaven," and with the eyes of faith, I saw Christ sitting at God's right hand. And I suddenly realized – THERE is my righteousness. Wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say, "Where is your righteousness?" for it was right before him. I saw that my good frame of heart could not make my righteousness better nor a bad frame of heart make my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, forever. Now my chains fell off indeed! I felt delivered from slavery to guilt and fears. I went home rejoicing for the love and grace of God. Now I could look from myself to him, and I realized that all those weak character qualities in my heart were like

the pennies that rich men carry in their pocket, when their gold is safe under lock and key. Christ is my treasure, my righteousness. Now Christ was my wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and salvation.” - John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*

“Praise to Christ for his Atonement will be the main agenda of heaven.” J.I. Packer

“O Mystery of Love Divine, that thought and thanks o’erpowers. Lord Jesus was our portion thine, and was thy portion ours? Our load of sin and misery, Didst thou the sinless bear? Thy spotless robe of purity, Do we the sinners wear?” – Thomas Gill, *O Mystery of Love Divine*

Questions

1. Paul calls the immoral Corinthians “*sanctified in Christ Jesus*” and “*saints*”. How can this be?
2. Paul says in v. 3 – “*Grace and Peace to you...*” How does peace flow out of grace?
3. Atonement/Imputation theology causes offense. How is the gospel offensive?
4. Where have you experienced this “guiltless” imputation in your life? (Or not?)
5. Does this move you? Emotionally? Psycho-dynamically? Relationally?

Week 3: 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Theme: The Foolishness of the Cross – Weakness and the Christian Life

Jesus lived in weakness and died in weakness on the Cross. He spent his time with the lost and the shoddy. He talked on and on about the last becoming first and the first becoming last. He died alone, bitterly forsaken by all. Christianity has from its inception prized weakness and rebuffed strength. Jesus' life and "embarrassing" death informs Paul's thinking in this passage, as do the facts on the ground. The religious (Jews) couldn't accept a defeated Savior and the philosophers (Greeks) couldn't believe in a God who would "take frail flesh and die." This leads Paul to hone the point later, saying that "*God's power is made perfect in my weakness...for when I am weak, then I am strong.*" Christians are the Anti-Little Engines That Could. Christians are the Little Engines That Couldn't, operating not out of self-sufficiency but out of need and helpless dependency. We, as Luther says, "*comprehend the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.*" This *modus operandi* is obviously folly and nonsense to the world, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

Quotes

"Christianity's conviction is that true power consists in powerlessness.... Martin Luther called this a "theology of the Cross" in distinction to a theology of glory. He saw the power of weakness as central, absolutely essential, to the Christian view of life. Christianity is a religion of salvation for people who are failures. In saving such people, Christianity makes them into something like successes. This is the dynamite. Christianity creates a confrontation with religions of rigor and demand. It also negates all attempts to get visible things to represent invisible things. These negations, as well as the positive essence of them, which is God's Grace, have made the history of Christianity what it is." - Paul Zahl, *The Christianity Primer*

"God has not arranged things so that the foolishness of the gospel saves those of us with an IQ above 130. Where would that leave the rest of us? Nor does the foolishness of what is preached transform the young, the beautiful, the extroverts, the educated, the healthy, the wealthy, the upright. Where would that leave the old, the ugly, the illiterate, the introverts, the poor, the sick, and the perverse?" - Don Carson

"We are a beautiful letdown. Painfully uncool. The church of the dropouts, the losers, the sinners, the failures, the fools." - Switchfoot, *Beautiful Letdown*

"It is certain the man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ." - Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*

Questions

1. The Foolishness of the Cross, while enduringly true, was directed to the Corinthian Church, which was attached to its own importance. In what ways is this message timely in today's Church?
2. How are we to understand our wealth, power, and privilege in light of this passage?
3. Where or how have you experienced religions of "rigor and demand"?
4. How do you "utterly despair of your ability"? What does it mean to "boast in the Lord"?

Week 4: 1 Corinthians 3:16-4:5

Theme: Identity—Who Am I?

We are all trying to answer one question “Who am I?” Despite what all the other voices (your own inner critic, your parents, your culture), 1 Cor 3:9 calls you God’s field and God’s building. Verse 16 calls you God’s temple. Verse 23 calls you God’s possession: “You are Christ’s and Christ is of God.” These statements are even more powerful when we realize that the church in Corinth was a mess. They could have rightly been called hypocrites or sad excuses for Christians. But all these are statements in 1 Cor 3 are about possession. “You are God’s field and God’s temple building. You belong to Christ.” They were doing everything that exhibited that they DID NOT belong to God and Paul tells them otherwise. This is the same for you. Belonging to God means that you are valuable to God. That God is concerned about you. That God sees and knows about you. God cares about you more than you do. Because you are of Christ and Christ is of God, God accepts, owns, and affirms you. God will never let you go even when you think he may be unimpressed with you.

Quotes

“Lewis Smedes, a professor of psychology, has identified three common sources of crippling shame: secular culture, unaccepting parents, and graceless religion.”—Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Am I?”

Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell calmly, cheerfully, firmly. Who am I? They often tell me I used to speak to my warders freely, friendly, clearly. Who am I? They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune—equally, smilingly, proudly—like one accustomed to win.

Am I, then, really all that which others say of me? Or am I only what I know of myself—restless and longing and sick? Struggling for breath...thirsting for words of kindness? Powerlessly trembling? Weary and empty at praying? Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly weakling? Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, o God, I am thine.

“If God loves us, why are we so sour? If we have been forgiven, why does our dancing seem so much like marching? If He’s God, why do we have to pretend to be God? If He knows our secrets and still accepts us, why do we have to keep them? If His love is without qualification, why do we keep trying to qualify? If the High King of heaven loves us, why do we keep trying to please the lesser kings? If we are given heaven for no other reason than His love, why should we be trying to add to what is already ours?” —Steve Brown

Questions

1. What are ways that we attempt to earn a positive identity?
2. Compare that culture, graceless religion, or your parents call you versus 1 Cor 3:9, 16, 23.
3. What is the significance of being God's field and temple building?
4. What does it mean to be "of Christ" and for Christ to be "of God"? What does it mean to be God's possession?

Week 5: 1 Corinthians 5:1-3 and 6:12-20

Theme: Sex and the City...of God – How Christians “think” and “do” sex.

Sex and the City is HBO’s show about the erotic life of Sarah Jessica Parker in NYC. There we see the culture’s attitudes about sex. The City of God is St. Augustine’s 4th Century book about how Christians are to be in and not of the world. As Christians, how are we to think about sex? It was a big problem in Corinth. A man was sleeping with his father’s wife. (5:1-3) Other men were going to prostitutes because they thought what they did with their bodies bore no relation to their “spiritual” lives. (6:12-20)

Two views of sex: *Hedonists* only value the body. Bodily pleasure is the highest good in life. Sex is a biological bodily need – like eating or drinking and we must obey our body’s sexual desires in order to be healthy people. *Gnostics* – or super spiritual types, disregard the body. (This was the problem in Corinth) All that counts is “spiritual life.”

Christians value the body and the spirit! God is a materialist - He became a body. (John 1:14) God created sex and pleasure and called it good. But for Christians, the meaning of sex goes beyond the body. When two people have sex they become “*one flesh*.” (6:16) A unity is formed that includes but goes beyond the body, creating a deep spiritual and emotional bond between two people. Sexual intercourse *creates* a marriage bond. From God’s point of view, the people you’ve had sex with are your spouses. With them you have become “*one flesh*”. Christians value sex because God so values sex. He guards it within the covenant of marriage, where the one flesh connection flourishes and sexual pleasure – bodily and spiritually – burns brightly.

Quotes

“Obey your thirst.” – Sprite commercial

"I think the ease of hooking up has, like, made people forget what they truly want," says Naomi. "People assume that there are two very distinct elements in a relationship, one emotional and one sexual, and they pretend like there are clean lines between them." – *Rolling Stone* article on the Duke Lacrosse Sex Scandal.

“The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured.” – C.S. Lewis

Questions:

1. Where have you encountered hedonist thinking about sex? Gnostic thinking?
2. Lewis’ quote: is it true in your experience?
3. Paul tells the Corinthians to “mourn”. (5:2) How is this like repentance?
4. How is it possible to “flee sexual immorality”? (6:17)
5. “You were bought with a price” (6:20) What does this say about forgiveness?

Week 6: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Theme: The Given Life

Chapter 7 contains practical teaching about marriage. Sex in marriage is good. Staying married is good. Staying married to a pagan is good. Celibacy is good. Staying single is good. Staying single after separation or death is good. But the chapter at its deepest level isn't about marriage *per se*. The main point is The Given Life. The controlling text of this chapter is the v.17. *"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him."* The paragraph ends: *"In whatever condition each was called there let him remain with God."*

The chapter's theme is "stay as you are" – live the life God has assigned to you. The Corinthians want to change their life status – including their marital status - in order to be more spiritual. They ask Paul how to structure their lives for maximum spiritual efficiency. Live the given life is Paul's response. It really doesn't matter all that much. Just lead the life that the Lord has assigned you. That could be marriage or singleness, for *"each one has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another."*

Live the given life. Your family, roommates, circumstances, etc, are all *given* to you. Most of us resent this. Our culture bucks against this. We are taught to take control, make our 1, 5, 20 yr. plan. We agonize about our present and our future because we do not trust God. Our failure, however, to live the Given Life doesn't stop God from giving to us. He has given us Himself in His Son's perfect offering on the cross, given us His Holy Spirit to lead, guide, comfort and help us in this life.

Quotes

"Don't be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his life span. O you of little faith...your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all..."

Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be given to you." Mt. 5:25-33

"Thy life's a miracle" – King Lear (After Gloucester attempts suicide, but is alive)

"So it must be concluded that while the turbulent state of the world deprives us of judgment, God, by the pure light of his own righteousness and wisdom, regulates these very commotions in the most exact order and directs them to their proper end." The result for us is "gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and a wonderful security respecting the future." – John Calvin on the Sovereignty of God

Questions:

1. How do the Sovereignty of God and The Given Life connect?
2. What about the Given Life as it relates to injustice or oppression?
3. What is your Given Life? Where do you struggle with it?
4. Read Mark 7:14-23. How does this passage relate?

Week 7: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Theme: The Command to Love

1 Corinthians 13 is called the “love chapter,” but the idea of love really gets started here in chapter 8. The controversy over food sacrificed to idols is really just the occasion for Paul to talk about love and the Christian’s call to consider others more important than themselves.

In the Greek culture of Paul’s day, people did religious sacrifices, bringing sacrificial animals to the pagan temple to offer them to their gods. In many rituals only part of the meat was burned and the family making the sacrifice took the rest home to eat or sell at the market. As Paul begins to reply to this controversy, he affirms the majority Corinthian position that food sacrificed to idols was not corrupted by the act of pagan sacrifice. He agrees that such meat escapes corruption because the idols were really not gods at all. Apparently, a number of believers in Corinth were still so accustomed to idols that they had a hard-time thinking of food offered to idols in a new way. So, when they ate, their consciences, being weak in this area, felt defiled. They sensed that eating the meat compromised their devotion to Christ. Paul draws a firm conclusion: out of love for fellow Christians, he would never eat meat again if eating caused his brother to fall into sin. In Corinth at this time, most (if not all) butchered meat would have been dedicated to some idol. Paul insisted that even drastic self-denial of all meat is worthwhile if it protects others from falling into sin. According to Paul, loving others takes precedence over exercising freedom.

But there is a problem. The command to love does not generate the ability to love. Telling someone to do something doesn’t make it possible for them to accomplish it. This is the “problem of love.”

What do we do with the passages that command us to love (Rom 13:9, Gal 5:15, John 14:34-35, 1 John 3:11 and 16)? I think the Gospel answers our problem of love. I think that God’s love for us, shown through Jesus Christ, can generate love in our hearts for and toward others. We can love because God first loved us. Because we have experienced such affection, the command that comes to us to love each other is not the “ought” of external compulsion but the “transformation” of internal constraint. On its own, the commandment to love cannot provide the incentive or the power to fulfill it. But those who are in touch with the very source of love, who have been shown what love is, might be empowered to extend the life-giving love they experienced to others.

Quotes

“Now here is my secret—that I need God...that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving, I need God to help me be kind, as I no longer seem to be capable of kindness, I need God to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”—Doug Coupland, *Life After God*

“O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, That in thine ocean depths its flow- may richer, fuller be.”—George Matheson

Questions:

1. What might the “weaker brother” situation look like today?
2. Discuss the reality of “the problem of love.”

3. Discuss how God's love for you might influence how you view those in your life that are difficult to love.
4. What might it look like to participate in God's love for others as opposed to trying to generate love within yourself for people you 1) don't even like and 2) can't love on your own?

Week 8: 1 Corinthians 9:1-6, 15-23

Theme: The Christian Right?

Paul begins the chapter establishing his rights as an apostle – he has a right to make a living by preaching the gospel – either by patronage or by payment. Make no mistake – he’s got rights. (Sounds American!) But in verse 15 we read, “*But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.*” Although Paul has rights, he abandons them for the sake of the gospel. To make the point clear he says in v. 19 “*For although I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all....*” Some translations say, “slave to all.” Slaves have no rights.

Paul abandons his rights for the sake of love. It is the call of every Christian - selfless love of the other. In Paul’s case, love takes on the form of sharing the gospel. He becomes all things to all people to win people to Christ. (vs.19-23) He gives up his rights in all things so people can share in the gospel’s blessings.

You probably know you should give up your rights for the sake of loving others, and may even know that that is where true happiness is found. But, you’re just too attached to living for yourself and your rights. (Sounds Human!) If you feel burdened, then that is the right and true burden of the law, or the demand of God. The law shows us our need and in our need we hear the gospel. What is the gospel in this case? Although I may not be able to give up my rights there was One who gave up his rights for my sake. (Phil 2:6-8)

Quotes

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” – The Declaration of Independence

“Aim for heaven you get earth thrown in. And when you aim for earth you get neither.” – C.S. Lewis

“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died, and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake has died and was raised.” 2 Cor 5:14-15

Questions

1. What rights do you have that you do not want to abandon?
2. Has pursuing your rights led to happiness/fulfillment?
3. What is the Law here? What is the Gospel?
4. How does the Gospel move you to abandon your rights?
5. What is the role of prayer? The role of the Holy Spirit in this matter?

Week 9: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Theme: Temptation and the Grace of God

Temptation is steady, regular part of life. Temptations to plagiarize, hook up, gossip, judge, lie, be prideful, or control others (“for their own good”!). Ultimately, there is the temptation to despair – to believe that Christianity isn’t true. All these temptations are “*common to man*”, ever present, since the flesh, world, and devil are aligned against us.

The key verse in the passage is 10:12. The Corinthians thought they stood confidently, immune from temptation, sin and judgment because they had a magical view of baptism and communion. They believed that the sacraments themselves would protect them from sin and its consequences. Paul dispels this fallacy by pointing to the Israelites. They were *baptized* by the Red Sea, and fed by manna (Bread) and the Rock (Wine). Yet that was no protection for them! (see vs.6-9) If the Israelites couldn’t rely on their “baptism” and “communion”, for protection from temptation, sin and judgment, neither can the Corinthians. Nor can we! Our hope must be in something entirely outside of us. If even a little bit of our hope rests in something we do or think or say, then our hope will crumble against the flesh, the world, and the devil – which threaten to undo us. Our hope is in v.13 – “*God is faithful.*” We may be faithless, but God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. He has provided a “*means of escape*” from temptation, sin, and judgment – the cross, our only hope. Temptation, Sin, Judgment – all that is common to man, to every man and woman – all fell upon a man, one man, the man on the cross who died for others. There in Him and on Him, the “*wrath of God was satisfied.*” That’s grace! That’s the gospel! Because of Him we live in perpetual forgiveness. He is our only hope.

Quotes

“For though I am now chaste, patient, kind, and in firm faith, the devil will this very hour send such an arrow into my heart that I can scarcely stand. For he is an enemy that never desists nor becomes tired, so that when one temptation ceases, there always arise others and fresh ones.” - Martin Luther

“I need Thee every hour, stay Thou nearby; Temptations lose their power when Thou art nigh” – Annie Hawks, Hymn Writer, 1872

“In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm” - Tolkien, describing Sam the Hobbit’s love for Frodo which helped him resist temptation.

“What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies” – Thomas Cranmer

Questions:

- 1) What’s the link between temptation and Christian Cosmology: Flesh/World/Devil.
- 2) Where are your misplaced hopes for protection from temptation, sin, judgment?
- 3) What does it mean to hope/trust “in Christ alone”?
- 4) How does love motivate obedience?
- 5) Please discuss the Cranmer quote in relation to this passage.

Week 10: 1 Corinthians 13

Theme: Love

This passage is stunning in its power. It's probably the most famous passage in Scripture. Since love is the theme, I'm sure you've heard it at weddings over and over again. Yes, it's beautiful. But it is also widely misunderstood. To understand it we've got to set the context.

According to the bible, the human condition is not basically loving. Misbehavior is not an anomaly. Romans 3: "There is no one righteous, not even one." Genesis 6: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." With this kind of insight into the human heart, this passage is deeply distressing. Did you feel distressed as you read it? Distress is not the usual emotion elicited by this famous text, often called a "Hymn to Love" and read jarringly out of context at weddings. As if Paul was interested in romantic love here. 1 Cor 13 has nothing to do with Eros (romantic/sexual) and everything to do with Agape (selfless love for the other).

If we see this passage as Eros – romantic love at a wedding – then we can feel sentimental and removed. *"Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous, love is not boastful or arrogant; it is not rude nor does it insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right."* Isn't that nice? What a lovely sentiment, dear. What a nice ideal. Hearing those words in the glow of nuptial sentiment is not really them at all. They are not a hymn to love; they are description of love. Paul's description of love is decidedly not within the realm of human capability. And knowing our human condition, people at weddings should be weeping and wailing and repenting, on their knees begging God to give the couple what they cannot by their nature have!

Paul contrasts the perpetually misbehaving human heart with the description of the Agape love that comes only from God. We see this in the negatives in the passage: not jealous, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, etc. Paul uses the behavior of love as a foil to typical behavior of human beings – jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude. In short, we do not have the capacity to love. Love does not rise unaided from the human heart.

And yet! Here Paul is clearly calling the Corinthians to this agape love! That which we're not capable of he's calling us to! In fact he says that anything they do and say is entirely worthless without it! If I have not love I am nothing, gain nothing. What a thing to say!

If I pray everyday, go to Uganda every summer, serve the poor every Tuesday but have not love, I gain nothing. Everything you do is worthless and hopeless without love. Tough standards, eh? To hear this Scripture rightly, as we've said, is to throw yourself on the mercy of God. And, it is also to recognize not yourself in its beautiful lyric, but to recognize someone else. The meaning of the text is clear when we insert another name, the Name above all Names, the Name at which every shall bow and every tongue confess. "Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus is not jealous; is not boastful or arrogant. Jesus is not rude, does not insist on his own way. Jesus is not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Jesus never fails."

We love because we have first been loved. For those who have been loved by Jesus Christ, Agape is already actively at work in us through Him. That we cannot recognize it is a sure mark of its presence.

Be sure of this. Love is the only thing that counts in life. “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” (Gal 5:6)

We love because we have first been loved. We have been loved specifically, concretely in the self-sacrifice of the one who is patient and kind, the one who asked His Father to remove the bitter cup of suffering, but did not insist on his own way. We have been loved by the one who bore the “sins of the whole world,” and endured the scourge on his back, the nails in his hands and the spear in his side for our sake. We have been loved by the one whose breath and pulse failed on a Friday, but who rose again on a Sunday rejoicing in the truth.

Quotes

“I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.”—Hamlet’s description of himself (Shakespeare)

“There is a secret at the heart of this passage. Agape would be unattainable for the human being if it were not for God’s invincible activity on our behalf, through the power of his Son’s sacrifice. Love does not lead to God; God in Jesus Christ leads us to love. Agape is not an ideal for me to aim at; agape is already actively at work in me from beyond myself.”—Fleming Rutledge

Questions:

1. Regarding the Hamlet quote: What does it say about the human condition? Where do you relate to Hamlet characters? How is he like you? How are you like him?
2. So how do we get this love that we do not have in our prideful, revengeful, ambitious hearts?
3. What might this Agape, this love that comes from being loved look like?
4. What does “love never fails” and “love covers a multitude of sins” mean?
5. Why is it significant to realize that love cannot be forced, disciplined, chosen, or calculated?

Week 11: 1 Corinthians 14-15

Theme: Resurrection

If Jesus has died and claimed victory, then why are there 40 million people with AIDS? If God is a Healing God, then why is your brother clinically depressed? If God is a Sovereign God, then why do some people never experience faith and love? If the Spirit lives in me, why do I fall again and again into the same rut of sin? If God is omniscient, how could He create a world in which a snake would enter a garden and a woman would bite a poisoned apple and the sting of death would infect and terrorize every little baby born to this fragile earth our island home?

Do you hear those cries from the dark? Facing the reality of death is the time to let the cries from the dark come from your lips. Yes, Jesus will come again. Yes, Jesus will destroy the last enemy to be destroyed. Yes, Jesus will crush the serpent under his heel, just as he will trample down death in his quest to “*put all enemies under his feet.*”

And yes, the cries from the dark, each and every cry will be heard and answered by the One who will wipe away every tear from the eyes that cry. And yes, when every rule and authority and power has been overthrown then “*death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*” Then God will be “*all in all*” and the cries from the dark will turn to songs of endless praise.

Quotes

“Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death.”—Burial Liturgy (Book of Common Prayer)

“All our periods and transitions in this life are so many passages from death to death.”—John Donne

Kierkegaard writes “How shall God in heaven wipe away every tear from your eye when you have not yet wept?”

Questions

1. Have you taken stock of this present darkness? Do you long for Jesus to come again to judge the living and the dead?
2. What does it mean that Jesus is the Enduring One, the one whom we finally trust to cast away the works of darkness when he shall come again in his glorious majesty?
3. What does it mean that Jesus conquered the last enemy, death?