

A Look at First Corinthians



A Study for the Presbyterian Women of First Presbyterian Church, Greenwood, SC

2026-2027

With Elise Collins

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Lesson videos available on You Tube under "A Look at First Corinthians"

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Introduction

Why this alternative?

Each year we choose a Bible study for the women of First Presbyterian Church. Many years we use the Horizons Bible Study. There are some years, though, when the Horizons study causes some discomfort among our members. This is such a year. We believe the material is Biblical, but the questions for discussion made members concerned. These are good topics to discuss in a well-mediated environment. But many feel ill-equipped for such conversations and fear conflict. 1 Corinthians is well worth study, so we are using the same Bible passages for this alternate study. The discussion questions are equally valuable while not as potentially thorny. If curious, Elise is providing video lessons on the Horizons study as well as on this alternative.

About 1 Corinthians:

Paul established the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey as found in Acts. This letter is written by Paul during his third missionary journey while he is in Ephesus just across the sea from Corinth. So the church in Corinth is young and still learning and growing in a culture that has its challenges. Paul would receive word about his fledgling congregations when people visited or when people wrote letters. We have collected many letters written among Paul and these congregations. Each gives us a glimpse into the unique workings of one congregation. Each letter is specific to the congregation while also offering timeless advice. Keep this in mind as we dissect what is specific to the church and what is representative for all churches.

Corinth in this time was a major city in the Roman Empire. It is located near the isthmus between the Adriatic Sea and the Aegean Sea. This means that there were many cultures coming and going from this area because of the nearby ports. There were also pagan temples around including one for the goddess Aphrodite, which featured prostitutes. Many during this time considered Corinth a “sin city.”

Interestingly, the Isthmian Games were held biennially and was hosted by Corinth. This is why Paul uses athletic phrases in his letters.

As you can see, many of Paul’s references would have hit home with his readers because he used issues pertinent to them. If Paul were writing a letter to our

church in Greenwood, no doubt he would bring up data centers and barbecue as well as lake analogies.

We will read this letter through that historical lens while also gleaning wisdom that is timeless.

As we read God's word, please keep these tools in mind. **Anne Graham Lotz**, in her Bible Study *Jesus In Me*, recommends that we look at a Bible passage and pick out the facts. Then think about what the passage means. Finally, see how the passage applies to you in your life.

1. Read a passage.
2. Pick out the facts.
3. What does it mean?
4. How does it apply to you and your life?

We will use this method for our study.

Chapter 1: September: 1 Corinthians 1-2

Welcome! In this first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul is laying some groundwork to remind his readers to focus on God and not the world. Notice how he starts gently with a greeting reconnecting him with his church.

1 Corinthians 1: 1-3

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and our brother Sosthenes,*

*²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be
his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our
Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:*

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

Paul established the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey as found in Acts. This letter is written by Paul during his third missionary journey while he is in Ephesus just across the sea from Corinth. He has received word from visiting members and in a letter about some goings on that he feels a need to address, which he does in this letter.

Notice how he reminds them at the very beginning that he was called by God to be an apostle. This undergirds the authority with which he will speak to them throughout the letter reminding them to heed what he says and put into practice better ways than the rumors he has heard.

Paul also extends an arm of compassion reminding them that they are God's church, sanctified in Christ, and also called by God to be holy people. Paul is speaking words of hope over them calling them to return to their potential. But he also mentions that they are but one part of the holy people called everywhere by the Lord. And that Jesus is Lord of many, not just the people of Corinth.

I wonder if that is to remind them that others are facing issues and concerns and that we all have the choice of how to respond – with more grace and Christlikeness. And then he offers them grace and peace from God.

This whole section makes me think of when I need to have a conversation with a child who has responded in a less than desirable way to their circumstances. A parent gently swoops in with love and reassurance while also leveraging their

authority and setting expectations for behavior choices. Paul is responding as a parent to his flock.

In the next section, consider why thanksgiving is always an important part of Paul's letters.

1 Corinthians 1: 4-9: Thanksgiving

⁴I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I love how Paul's letters always have a section of thanks. It sets the tone of the letter in a positive and uplifting way gaining the trust and appreciation of his readers.

Paul thanks God for grace and enrichment. Amen to that! And because of this grace and enrichment, we do not lack spiritual gifts. God is faithful to us, calling us into fellowship with Jesus.

Grace, enrichment, spiritual gifts – Paul is thanking God for these gifts, but he will also have words for Corinth later about their response to these gifts.

But first, let's look at what is causing some division among his readers.

1 Corinthians 1: 10-17: A Church Divided Over Leaders

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹²What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas^[b]"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

And here we have the problem Paul is writing to resolve. Division. Paul urges his readers to agree, to be united. He is disappointed that there is quarreling about different factions. They were boasting in who they followed as being the best and Paul says that's not the point. The point is that we all follow Jesus. Even today we can get caught up in which denomination is better – Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist. Paul would remind us it is WHOM we worship that is important. Dare I say that even with football teams and political parties, don't be divided when the important thing is that we are all united in Christ!

This next section may seem confusing, but Paul is trying to make a point about the upside-down nature of God's church.

1 Corinthians 1: 18 – 2:5: Christ Crucified is God's Power and Wisdom

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”^[c]*

²⁰Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God

chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”^[d]

2 And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.^[e] 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 with great fear and 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 human wisdom, but on God’s power.

Are you confused? Basically, Paul is saying that God’s wisdom seems like foolishness to the world. And things that seem wise to the world are foolishness in the kingdom of God. For example riches and wealth are at the top of the list for worldly things people covet. But in God’s kingdom money means nothing. What is special in the world is very different from what is special in God’s eyes.

Paul says God uses us to further his kingdom but not because we are anything special. Nope! Does that hurt your feelings? God chooses to use the underdogs – the ones who don’t know it all, can’t get it all right, and are broken. So, the only thing we can boast about is God! We should not boast about human wisdom and worldly things! Instead, our faith rests in God’s power alone. That’s the opposite of what the world tells us. In a world where we’re told to brag about ourselves and our lives, Paul reminds us to choose humility. Because God is the one who deserves the glory.

Now we will see a shift to include the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2: 6-16: God’s Wisdom Revealed by the Spirit

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 declare God’s wisdom, a mystery 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. ⁹ However, as it is written:

*“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”^[f] —
the things God has prepared for those who love him—
¹⁰these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.^[g] ¹⁴The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, ¹⁶for,

*“Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”^[h]
But we have the mind of Christ.*

Paul highlights the amazing gift of the Spirit to each of us. God within us! Our Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves and it prompts us to make us an even better version of ourselves. The Spirit is not from this world. The Spirit helps us have the mind of Christ. Of course, we choose whether to heed the nudging of the Spirit. Paul desperately wants us to choose to heed the promptings of the Spirit – God’s voice within leading us on right paths for his glory and our good. We should focus on God and not the world!

Highlights:

- The world divides. Division is unhealthy. Strive for unity in Christ – in God’s power.
- Focus on the big picture that is God’s will, not worldly things.
- God loves an underdog and undergirds us with His strength. Remember that the message is more important than the messenger.

- The Spirit helps us discern the mind of Christ. We choose how to use the nudges of the Spirit.

We have an opportunity for conversation now. Let us be sure to THINK before we speak. Use these guidelines before commenting:

T – Is it true?
H – Is it helpful?
I – Is it inspiring?
N – Is it necessary?
K – Is it kind?

Points to Ponder:

1. What divides us? Think about rival sports teams.
 - a. At what point does this become negative?
 - b. Grits or cream of wheat?
 - c. Sweet tea or unsweet?
 - d. Wearing white after Labor Day?
 - e. What pet peeves do you have and when does it become unhealthy?
2. What unites us?
3. Think of an underdog. What is appealing?
4. What is the big picture regarding physically attending church when you can as opposed to thinking attending church in person is unnecessary?
5. How can we better listen and respond to the Spirit within us?

Prayer:

Lord God,

Thank you for your grace and mercy and strength. Thank you for the Holy Spirit within us. Help us to better listen and respond to your will with the help of the Holy Spirit within us. Give us eyes to look for opportunities of unity rather than division. Help us focus on you, Lord, and not worldly distractions. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

October: 1 Corinthians 3-4

Welcome, friends! Last month, Paul advised us not to focus on the world, but on God. I hope you were mindful of it all month. I found worship music to be a great tool for helping to keep my mind on God. Does anyone have an observation to share?

This month, Paul is going to remind us that God is the authority we should count on and respond to. We can get so distracted by teachers and teachings, but if we give all glory to God and not to humans, then we're on the right track. Let's read what concerned Paul regarding the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9: *The Church and Its Leaders*

³Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

⁵What, 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. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

Although Paul knows the Spirit lives in the people he is addressing, he is reminding them that they are yet babes in the faith. They are still very new in the endeavor of the church. Paul knows that worldliness still courses through their veins with much more familiarity and strength than does their fledgling faith. He confirms this by citing their jealousy and quarreling – the actions of humans who want to seem more important or better than others. The lack of humility gives them away as being worldly and caring about worldly aspirations.

Paul tries to gently remind them that it is Jesus that really matters. The faith is planted in us by some, watered by some, but ultimately what really matters is the

seed of faith itself. The people along the way who have nurtured us have done it to the glory of God – or should have, according to Paul. Each person who plays a part will be rewarded accordingly. Paul describes us as co-workers in God’s service. Think about some of the people who poured into and shaped your faith. I remember the Lambs – a precious older couple who shepherded me when I was in elementary school. I remember Dot Secor who made Sunday School so interesting when I was a youth. I think about my grandparents who showed me what faith looks like when encountering strangers. And I can visualize my parents living their faith in the work of the church. Take a moment and think of some of the people God planted along your faith journey. God did that!

Parents often talk about how it takes a village to raise our children. I think Paul would agree that it takes a village to nurture each of us in our faith throughout our lives. Goodness knows I still need shepherding even now! I still make the most ridiculous mistakes even when I know better! We are never fully mature. We always have room to grow. That is why it takes a village. No single one of us is enough. We all need each other to nurture each other. Our church needs people to give of their time to nurture the children, the youth, other women, men, the elderly, the caregivers, the sick, the lonely, and more. We need people to pray with the intercessory prayer group for the benefit and good of us all. We need people to share the gift of music and talents and tithes. It takes all these many facets working together to shape even one of us. Even so there are gaps that only God can fill. God has provided for us in so many ways and with so many helpers. Who still helps shepherd you even today? How has God called you to serve?

1 Corinthians 3: 10-15

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

As people who influence others, we are but one part laid upon the foundation who is Jesus Christ. That means that Jesus is the seed, the foundation, the core of who and whose we are. Each one of us belongs to God. Along the way, others have poured into and shaped us – adding to our foundation. Some for good, others not.

God holds each accountable based on their impact. In turn, we have an opportunity to pour into and shape others for Christ. And we, too, are responsible for everyone we influence. Does that make you nervous or excited? We all have so much to offer! Do we share truth and love and grace and mercy? Do we share wise counsel? Do we build up or tear down? Do we lead by example or offer advice only? Take a moment and reflect on these. Share if you feel led.

1 Corinthians 3: 16-23

¹⁶Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"^[a]; ²⁰and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."^[b] ²¹So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^[c] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

We are God's temple. His Spirit is within us. We become sacred ground-individually and corporately. No one can come against us without consequences we may or may not see. That also means that we will be held accountable if we fail to hold sacred other children of God. We have an opportunity, an obligation to do our best when in a position to influence others. This can feel a little prickly because, let's face it, we are so human and we are going to mess up! But where is our heart? Where is our intention? Are we mindful of our responsibility? Does this feel like a burden or an opportunity? Take a moment to reflect.

Do not fall into the trap of worldly wisdom. Our calling is higher than that.

1 Corinthians 4: 1-5: *The Nature of True Apostleship*

4 This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Apostles are those tasked with spreading the message of the leader – in this case Christ. They are servants entrusted with mysteries revealed to them by God. Paul is such a case. He experienced the famous Damascus Road theophany. The disciples too learned from Christ directly and experienced firsthand the amazing miracles Jesus performed. Saints over the years have claimed experiences of meeting Christ, hearing him speak to them, or witnessing miracles themselves. We all wonder about the mysterious and unexplainable out there. Have we had moments ourselves when we felt a spark of peace in the middle of devastation? Have we sensed love in the throes of feeling alone? Have we had hope pierce the fog of doom surrounding us? Do we look at nature and revel in the creator? Do we look at the face of a loved one and overflow with emotion? These mysteries are no mystery at all. This is God at work within us and around us. And these moments call us to be faithful.

Paul calls us not to judge each other. He doesn't even judge himself, which I doubt is true for most of us. Sometimes we are our own worst critics. But Paul insists that judgement can wait. For God is the judge and the time will come when he alone shows us what he needs to show us. He will shine a light on the darkness within us. Probably the same thing our own Spirit harps on throughout our lives gently trying to work on our hearts. For years God placed strong women in my life. He also made me a strong, stubborn woman. As you can imagine, I have wrestled with working with other women like me. God has led me kicking and screaming to learn humility and grace. And the icing on the cake – he blessed me with two daughters just like their mama! I'm still growing and learning and messing up! But he hasn't given up on me. He keeps on working on me! Thank goodness! That means he won't easily give up on our loved ones who have their own journeys and trials ahead.

Paul reminds us: God alone is judge. Our job is to be faithful.

⁶Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. ⁷For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

“Do not go beyond what is written.” Interesting. I love the story Becky Bryson tells about her mom, “Becky, quit interrupting my story with the facts!” We all love a good embellishment which makes for an even better story. But when it comes to faith we are not to go beyond what is written in the sense that we should not be trying to take credit for anything ourselves. Did you wake up with an amazing idea in the middle of the night – that’s God. Did you just happen to say the most beautiful words at just the right time – that’s God. Everything we have to offer is from God. To him be all glory!

1 Corinthians 4: 8-13

⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! ⁹For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹²We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

Unfortunately, Paul is calling out the readers of his letter. He makes fun of all they might boast about contrasting what he and true apostles experience. He takes what makes the readers prideful and shows how his life and experience is the opposite. The false apostles boast and live well. The true apostles bear hardship but offer kindness. Paul calls himself the “garbage of the world.” No one wants that title. It makes me think of when my parents were missionaries in the Caribbean.

We lived off of very little and blended in with the community in many ways. We ate what the locals ate and wore what the locals wore. As a 10–13-year-old while there, we became like those around us. We spoke with a Vincentian accent. My brother even yelled at a white man walking down the road, “Honky!” (This is a derogative term for a white person.) I looked over at him and said, “Hey, Andre, we’re white.” Some would say we sacrificed to minister there. But, in my opinion and experience, we just became part of the people that we got to be in ministry with. That’s what real mission work looks like when God calls you. And I feel confident that’s how Paul felt. Being among the people is a far greater joy than rising above the people.

1 Corinthians 4: 14-21: *Paul’s Appeal and Warning*

¹⁴I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. ¹⁵Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶Therefore I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

¹⁸Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. ²¹What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

Paul says he’s not trying to shame them, but to warn them. Sometimes it is hard to see our actions for what they are. Sometimes we have to be called out in love and shown the truth. Paul is like a loving father offering counsel to his child who has strayed and is in danger. Paul tells us to imitate him, his example. He even sends Timothy as an in-person emissary to help them.

Paul warns of arrogance. Often arrogant people talk a big talk. Paul questions what power they actually have other than talk. God’s kingdom is all about power that manifests in an upside down fashion and will be easily distinguishable from the big talkers. Power to heal and love and forgive. Power to build up and call out in love. Power that is humble and sacrificial. Power that is not condescending or full of judgement. That’s God’s power among us.

And then Paul, who has compared himself to a father to his readers asks if he should come as the disciplinarian or as the gentle, loving father? We all hope for the gentle, loving father. But, in truth, the disciplinarian is the same father showing us how our lives can be better because he loves us!

Highlights:

- We are mere human beings. We should not boast but glorify God.
- We should not claim worldly wisdom but strive for God's wisdom.
- We should allow God to be the judge rather than us.
- We should turn from arrogance and big talk to rely on God's power alone.

Points to Ponder:

1. How are we like infants in Christ?
2. Give examples of being coworkers in Christ.
3. How do you feel about being held accountable for how we influence others?
4. How have we been judgy and how can we change that?
5. How can we shift from judgy certainty in our views and nurture a holy curiosity?

Prayer:

Lord God,

We are your children always growing and learning. Please shepherd us and teach us. Discipline us when (not if) we need it so that we can become better stewards of ourselves and those we influence.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

November: 1 Corinthians 5-6

Welcome back! How did you do this month with being less certain and more curious? Hopefully you found God at work showing you different perspectives and urging you contemplate different questions.

Paul has set up his readers with focusing on God and not the world, and he has challenged them to trust God as the ultimate authority. Now, Paul is ready to open the can of worms that has caused him concern. Here we go! We are jumping right into sexual immorality this month.

1 Corinthians 5: 1-5: *Dealing With a Case of Incest*

5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? ³ For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. ⁴ So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, ^{[a][b]} so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

Sexual immorality that even pagans do not tolerate is pretty bad! At this time in a port city like Corinth, standards would have been pretty loose for pagans. After all, even some of the temples employed prostitutes. But when *Oedipus Rex*, which was written 450 years prior, frowns upon incestuous relationships, culture itself has a standard and the religious should be even more scrupulous especially since this specific relationship is forbidden (Leviticus 18:8). It is possible they could have loved one another. But it is equally, if not more likely, that his stepmother held position and fortune, which the stepson could not bear to lose.

Though this sin is a concern for Paul and the church of Corinth, what seems to be even more alarming for Paul is that the members of the church have taken the news pridefully and complacently. Paul is appalled that they have not dealt with this matter themselves because it is so blatantly unlawful.

Paul may not be there in person, but he reminds them he is there in spirit. If the church is gathered, and Paul is there in spirit, and the power of the Lord is present,

then they should have left the man to his own devices apart from the church so that Satan could claim him and destroy his flesh in hopes that God could save his spirit in the end. This is interesting. Basically, let evil be evil and meet ruin. Only then will the consequences of their actions gain them an opportunity to repent and be restored. We call it “rock bottom” now. We pray for our loved ones to hit rock bottom sooner than later so they can get back on track. This is a hard concept – literally wishing ill on someone because that is what is going to take to make a true difference in life for them. Or so we hope!

1 Corinthians 5: 6-8

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Honestly, Paul's real problem seems to be with church members boasting about sin. By talking about the sin, by allowing considerations regarding sinfulness, we exacerbate sin. This gossip, this exposition of sin becomes malice and wickedness. Paul compares this behavior to bad yeast tainting the bread. It needs to be thrown out, done away with or it will spoil everything.

Let's pause for a moment here. Talking about other people's sin is not in and of itself bad. I can talk about how someone is hurting, how we can reach out and try to help, how we can pray for those involved, how we can learn from other's mistakes in a powerful way, or how we, too, may have had similar pain and struggle. But, when the conversation shifts to judgement, hearsay, and the “juicy” details, how is this conversation beneficial to anyone? Ask yourself, is this helpful or is this not? Don't deceive yourself. Gossip is toxic. It reflects poorly on the gossiper. Don't be that person.

Instead, we need to be unleavened (yeastless), who we really are, sincere and truthful, benefiting everyone with really good bread. Christ was sacrificed for us. How can we not also sacrifice that which does not benefit us? Words come from our hearts – they can build up or tear down. Which one do you want to be known for? I remember one time at a family occasion speaking not completely nicely about something that happened. My cousin-in-law excused herself from the

conversation saying, “Oh, I don’t think this conversation is for me.” She didn’t fuss at me. She didn’t shame me. She simply removed herself. It made a powerful statement to me – one still fresh on my mind 20 years later! Gossip requires a talker and a listener. Refuse to be either. It takes practice and we’ll still mess up occasionally. But keep working at it! You’ll be so glad you did!

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister^[d] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”^[d]

In a previous letter, Paul has written that the members of the church should not associate with sexually immoral people not necessarily regular immoral people who are greedy or swindlers or idolaters. That would be impossible to avoid unless you became a hermit. But now, in the current letter, Paul is saying that if a church member is immoral of the sexual or non-sexual variety, you must not associate with them – not even to eat.

Paul tells us it is not our business to judge those outside the church. God is their judge. Our job is to expel sinners – those who call themselves church people but choose to live immorally – from the community of faith.

Are you wondering if that isn’t all of us and that churches would be pretty empty if this was the case? It seems pretty severe considering we’re all sinners and Jesus died for that reason! But Paul is making a stand. Blatant disregard for immorality while claiming to be faithful is toxic for those remaining in the faith. This is Paul’s concern – that more would fall into immorality if seen as tolerated. Think about school teachers. They cannot allow a student to constantly sleep in class. This makes other students think it is okay to do the same while at the same time setting up the class to fail in their endeavors because they can’t be bothered to pay attention and learn and grow. Similarly, a restaurant can’t let its employees treat their customers poorly or it reflects badly on the business. Paul knows these

fledgling believers need firm boundaries in order to establish a foundation of faith. When we are new to something, we need firmer boundaries. Like that new diet – if I cheat on the smallest part, I am setting myself up to fail. What about that new exercise endeavor? If you let yourself slide at any point, you risk breaking a habit. Paul believes new believers need to be more strict as they learn the ropes. When I taught high school, I was the strictest for the first week of class. Once I established the expectations and consequences, then I could back off and really develop the class material. Things went beautifully! But I know some teachers who never earned the respect of the class and dealt with behavior problems that undermined the class. It's hard to go backwards. This is what Paul is telling his readers.

1 Corinthians 6: 1-6: *Lawsuits Among Believers*

6 If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people? ² Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! ⁴ Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? ⁵ I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? ⁶ But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers!

Paul also urges his readers to handle church affairs within the church. We know each other. We love each other. We should be able to speak truth in love to each other and not involve nonbelievers, right? Again, these readers are immature in their faith and Paul is treating them like a parent treats a child. Imagine siblings coming to a parent and saying, "He looked at me!" And you can figure out how that conversation will go. A parent knows the children and how they poke and prod each other. A parent knows how to handle the children. But imagine, if two siblings went to a grocery cashier and did the same. That doesn't make sense, does it? Paul says to keep things in house where we are a family who knows each other and has established trust.

Nowadays this would be seen as very awkward for us. Can you imagine going to a couple and saying you know one has been unfaithful and you want to talk with them about it? I don't think any of us feel like we want to do that! But you better

believe that I try to guide, instruct, and refocus our children and youth when I make observations that call for comment. I think the key is trust. There are some members of the church I trust implicitly and would hear what they had to tell me even if it is hard. And I have! True story! Similarly, I believe there are some who wouldn't mind hearing a word from me in some cases but only because we have established a level of trust and love. This is what Paul hopes for those who call themselves brothers and sisters in Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:7-11

⁷ The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? ⁸ Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. ⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men^[e] ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

For Paul, lawsuits meant his people were trusting non-church members more than their own brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul sees that as defeat. And he calls them out for it. Wrongdoers will not be rewarded. They shouldn't deceive themselves. Paul lists off a bunch of sins that will cause us not to inherit the Kingdom of God. However, Paul says that is what they WERE before they were washed clean, sanctified, and justified by Christ and the Spirit of God.

Jesus washes our uncleanness from us. And let me be clear – we all have uncleanness to be washed away! Do not get bogged down in the list of sins Paul lists – he could just have easily have said gossipers, mean girls, holier-than-thou people, those who think they're better than others, fakers, etc. I've been all of the above – how about you? We all need forgiveness. But the next part is key as well. God sets us apart for his special purpose – that's sanctification. And then we are made right with God, and that is justification.

When we were children and we did something we shouldn't have, do you remember how your parent responded? "Elise, you hurt your brother when you clawed him with your fingernails. What do you think should happen?" I would start

crying and feel so sad and I would tell my brother I was sorry. And he would say it was ok. But that wasn't the end of it.

"Elise, you are his big sister. You have a job to look out for him and help take care of him." Now, I am reminded that I am set apart and have a special purpose that I need to take seriously. After I take this to heart and acknowledge it, then I am once again right with God and I get a fresh start. This is the relationship Paul wants for us. What situations come to mind from your life? When have you had to be reminded about being held to a higher standard in Christ?

1 Corinthians 6: 12-20: *Sexual Immorality*

¹² "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."^[1] ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.^[9]

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

This passage starts with such a powerful thought – I have the right to do anything but not everything is beneficial. Isn't that insightful! We all want to believe we can do whatever we want. It's our choice. That's free will. However, we should want what's best for us and for others. Whatever we choose for ourselves and others should be beneficial without question. Speeding may appease a thrill seeker, but it is not safe for them or anyone in their path. Eating chocolate in abundance may feel like a dire need for me, but I know it is not healthy for my body. Watching tv is relaxing and fun but sitting for overly long periods is not healthy. Everything we choose should be weighed by its benefit for us and others. Attending church online

is beneficial to me, but is it beneficial to others? Maybe I should go to church in person when I can because God may need to use me, my experiences, and my gifts to benefit someone else. And maybe there is someone there he desperately wants to cross my path for my benefit!

Paul also reminds us that when we are sexual with someone, our bodies become one. Our flesh mingles. We should choose wisely so that these encounters are beneficial – meaning health wise as well as emotionally.

Paul compares this bodily oneness with the spiritual oneness we have because the Spirit dwells within us. God lives in our body, so we need to treat it like a temple. Paul chose to live a chaste life. But we know that God created sex for our pleasure and for the proliferation of life. These are beautiful gifts and not to be sullied with choices that are not to our benefit. We get to go to God individually to figure that out for ourselves.

Highlights:

- Immorality is not a good choice, but gossiping about immorality is harmful as well.
- Bad yeast spoils the bread. Corruption spoils the group. Live unleavened with sincerity and truth.
- Disputes among brothers and sisters should be settled within by those they trust. God washes, sanctifies, and justifies us.
- Not everything is beneficial. Discern and choose what is.
- Just as we are joined as one physically in sex, so are we joined as one in Christ through the Spirit. Live treating the body as a temple.

Points to Ponder:

1. Distancing yourself from someone because of their choices can be very difficult. Share how God has worked in these situations.
2. How are poor choices contagious sometimes?
3. Do you have someone you trust enough to tell you hard things about yourself?
4. Have you ever tried to “reprimand” someone for their behavior? How did it go?

5. Paul distinguishes between sins outside the body (like theft and slander) and sins against the body (like adultery and sex with a prostitute). He reminds us that we are not our own. He encourages us to make choices that are to our benefit. How does this help you reframe questionable actions that tempt you?

Prayer:

Lord God,

You want what is best for us. You want us to associate ourselves with trustworthy people of faith with whom we can discern and grow. You want us to do that which is beneficial. Please help us, Lord, in our bodies and minds to honor you.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

December: 1 Corinthians 7-8

Last month was a doozy. Were you more aware of gossip? Did God show you how opportunities that were more beneficial than others? Were you able to focus more on what binds than what divides? Share if you feel led.

This month, we'll look at being a loving example for others. And Paul kicks us off with living chaste or sexually faithful lives.

1 Corinthians 7: 1-9: *Concerning Married Life*

7 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." ² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. ³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷ I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

⁸ Now to the unmarried^[a] and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. ⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Paul has chosen to live a single and celibate life. His passion is doing the will of the Lord. Fortunately, he realizes that not everyone is wired in the same way and so encourages marriage as an alternative. In marriages of the church, Paul assumes church members are in healthy marriages, I would say, and that the husband and wife should give themselves to each other freely and trustingly. (As a disclaimer, we need to acknowledge that not all marriages are healthy. For unhealthy marriages, I would not offer counsel. Instead, I recommend seeking counsel from professional counselors.)

Though Paul chooses and recommends a celibate life, he realizes that temptation of the flesh is alive and well and, quite honestly, perfectly normal. Temptation here

is not the best choice of words. Humans have hormones and instinctual bodily desires that are made by God and should not be frowned upon. What concerns us is how we act on these desires. Paul encourages marriage in those cases.

1 Corinthians 7: 17-24

¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Paul talks about separation and divorce here. Ideally, couples will stay together. However, Paul admits sometimes this won't happen.

In the situation where one of the married couple is not a believer, the other is charged with staying with them. The believing spouse sanctifies the unbeliever and their children. On the other hand, if the unbeliever leaves, that's ok.

There are a lot of gaps here. We cannot in good conscience go into detail here about separation or divorce except to say that even in Paul's time, it was happening. The bottom line is that a healthy marriage can be beneficial and ideally the couple will stay faithfully married. On the other hand, Paul acknowledges that this is not always the case – separation and divorce happen.

Concerning Change of Status

¹⁷ Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not

become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

The Jewish laws were plentiful and acted as stumbling blocks for new Gentile believers. Paul was reminding his readers that however you were when God called you, that is good enough. He is not trying to impose the standards of some onto others because they are not beneficial in all cases. Jewish men were circumcised. Gentiles were not. To ask a grown man to opt for circumcision as a requirement of faith is a deterrent. Paul did not want new believers to have such high hurdles as requirements for their faith journey.

Similarly, whatever position you are in when called by God, be content. This passage is complex because it speaks of slaves being content to be slaves. There is so much we could say about that, but instead, let's look at Paul's greater intention in this statement: Don't be troubled by your status because God turns everything upside down. The slave becomes free in Christ and the free becomes a slave for Christ. Paul is establishing that we should be content where we are knowing God is at work in our lives and that our focus should be on the mind of Christ and not the world.

1 Corinthians 7: 25-35: *Concerning the Unmarried*

²⁵ Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

²⁹ *What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

³² *I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— ³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

Paul believes the Day of the Lord, the return of Christ, will be soon – within his lifetime even. This is why he urges his readers to focus on pleasing the Lord with undivided devotion, which is hard to do if you have a spouse and family to think of. Clearly, 2000 years later, we see that the time did not come as soon as Paul thought. But, I believe he would still encourage us to live as though it could be at any moment.

1 Corinthians 7: 36-40

³⁶ *If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong^[b] and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin— this man also does the right thing. ³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.^[c]*

³⁹ *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰ In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

Paul prefers singleness because it allows you to be less distracted by worldly matters. But if his readers choose marriage, then he encourages them to be committed until death after which the wife may choose to remarry. This is often for reasons of provision. However, Paul notes that a woman would be happier to remain a widow than remarry and that is again because he sees time as being short and that all focus should go into serving God.

1 Corinthians 8: 1-8: *Concerning Food Sacrificed to Idols*

8 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. ² Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. ³ But whoever loves God is known by God.^[d]

⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Knowledge puffs up. No one likes a know-it-all, the saying goes. Paul is encouraging his readers not to be so concerned about knowledge and instead to focus on loving God and others. Loving others is the best focus.

Paul again addresses the difference in Jewish believers and Gentile believers by saying that food is food. Jews would never touch food offered to an idol. But, Paul does not want things being a stumbling block to new converts and fledglings in faith. So he says all food comes from the creator. It is more important to draw near to God in relationship than to worry about rules. Thoughts?

1 Corinthians 8: 8-13

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

Our actions and choices can influence others. So, Paul warns us that we need to be careful around others so as not to lead them astray. This is tricky as well.

Presbyterians enjoy wine like Jesus, but over consumption could send the wrong message to a new believer. The younger generation has a confident body image, generally speaking. Shaming them for “putting their body on display” (as the patriarchy taught us) could hinder their faith journey. Teaching others to believe as we do and not allow for questions or alternative viewpoints has already hindered so many. What has hindered you?

Whatever we do or say, let's be mindful that we have the power and opportunity to shape others. How are we shaping others?

Highlights:

- Being single or married is good for a follower of Christ.
- A believer can sanctify an unbeliever.
- Paul wants us to be content wherever we are because he believes it's only temporary.
- Paul's message is urgent because he believes Christ will return soon and he wants everyone to be focused on God.
- Separation, divorce, and death can end a marriage in certain cases.

Points to Ponder:

1. Paul's passion is his faith and that is why he has chosen a life in singleness.

2. What does it mean that the slaves have freedom in Christ and the free become slaves to Christ?
3. Do you know of marriages with a believer and nonbeliever? Do you believe Paul could see circumstances where he would adapt his thoughts on this subject?
4. What is the intent and effect of Paul bending the rules for new converts?
5. When is it important not to bend rules of faith?

Prayer:

Lord God,

You created us for each other. Bless us with healthy relationships where we can nurture and be nurtured and where we can glorify you together. Help us not to be stumbling blocks, but bright lights of your love.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

January: 1 Corinthians 9-10

This past month, we asked how our words and actions shape others. Are we sharing God's love or hindering others' faith journeys? Share any observations you have.

This month, Paul is focusing on authority, freedom, and discipline. Paul starts off establishing that people who work for the Lord have the right to be compensated. But see what he does with this information.

1 Corinthians 9: 1-18: *Paul's Rights as an Apostle*

9 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴ Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas^[a]? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."^[b] Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

The topic of Paul's authority has returned. He reminds his readers that he has encountered the resurrected Christ. He works for the Lord and results are seen in the people whose lives he has touched. Interestingly, he points out here that other apostles, and in our time ministers and pastors, have the joy of being supported financially by their congregants. But Paul does not want this for himself. He wants to be able to boast in the fact that he does not ask for support. He wants nothing to hinder those whom he serves. Paul's reward is to offer the good news for free.

1 Corinthians 9: 19-23: *Paul's Use of His Freedom*

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Paul chooses to get on the level of those with whom he works. He calls it being a slave to everyone. In order to connect and be able to share the good news, Paul adapts himself to be like the one he is reaching. He will become who he needs to be to reach the lost. He does whatever it takes to bring the good news to his listeners. This is how passionate he is about his calling. In his freedom, he chooses to become slave to those he can help.

Sharing our faith is important. Paul's practice reminds us that we should look for connection, familiarity with others. We should get on their level and not be a know-

it-all. We should be curious and interested, both a listener and a sharer. And eventually we build enough trust that they become curious about our faith. Then we can share what God means to us and how he loves us and covers us in grace and mercy.

1 Corinthians 9: 24-27: *The Need for Self-Discipline*

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Have you ever heard of the Couch to 5k? It's a training program to get a non-runner to be able to run a 5k in a matter of weeks. I tried the program. Apparently, I'm a level below couch because it took me twice as long to complete. I had to adapt the time frame to suit my abilities. But I did not give up. I kept up the training jogging from mailbox to mailbox and then the big day came and I ran every bit of a 5K. No walking at all. I cried when I finished. I was so grateful I had succeeded! I didn't care about my time – I just wanted to run and finish and I did.

This mental focus and physical training is what Paul wants for us. He wants us to be intentional in our faith, striving towards a goal, working to achieve it, and becoming victorious!

These particular metaphors would have been pertinent to the readers in Corinth because they hosted the Isthmian Games biennially. Events included footraces, boxing, wrestling, chariot races, a pentathlon and more. So Paul's words would have helped his readers relate to the games with which they were well known.

In the next passage, Paul takes his readers back to the history of the Israelites in the wilderness.

1 Corinthians 10: 1-5: *Warnings from Israel's History*

10 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They

were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.³ They all ate the same spiritual food⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

After fleeing Egypt, the Israelites had to cross the Red Sea. Moses raised his staff and God parted the waters and the entire nation of Israelites crossed on dry land! This miracle is a huge part of our faith stories. Once in the wilderness, the Israelites were led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Moses was their shepherd in this time of escape and wandering and the unknown. They ate manna provided by God; they drank water from sources God provided out of rock. The Israelites were completely dependent on God to provide for their every need. And they were terrified and dissatisfied remembering fondly the days of their slavery.

Interesting how something bad in the moment seems not-as-bad when we look back on it. The pain of the moment can lessen in hindsight. I was one of those sick pregnant mamas. With each new pregnancy, I forgot how bad I could feel until about 8 weeks in when “morning” sickness would once again strike and all the memories and feelings would come rushing back in a wave of nausea.

Paul is reminding his readers of their corporate history and as a warning, which continues here:

1 Corinthians

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”^[d] ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test Christ,^[d] as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

The Israelites set an example of being fickle in their faith. They would lose faith and hope and stray. They would have to be called back, but then they would stray again. Repeatedly, the Israelites in the wilderness grumbled and complained and doubted the Lord despite all he had done and shown them again and again.

Paul warns us not to fall into the example of the Israelites. When their faith waned, they became idolators. They chose behavior contrary to God's will. The Israelites would stray, doubt, sin, be punished, reconcile, and start fresh in an embarrassing cycle. That is the human weakness. Paul warns us against it.

1 Corinthians 10: 11-13

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation^[e] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted^[f] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,^[g] he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

The example of the wandering Israelites is a warning to us all. Paul wants us to stand firm! Falling is easy and common. Standing firm is the exception and that is what belief in Christ can do. We will all face things many others have faced before us. Christ can and will carry us through. We have Christ to rely on and lean on and cling to. Paul says we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear. I believe this means less about us and more about Christ's strength getting us through.

Have you ever felt tempted and a way out presented itself? Have you ever felt tempted and a way out did not seem obvious? If you look at that last sentence in the passage above, the last part is interesting: *he will provide a way out so you can endure it*. He does not use the word escape. He uses the word endure. Perhaps the way out is going through it with God's help and this builds endurance within us. As parents, we so badly want to make life easier for our children. But good parents realize that trials build character and teach lessons. Allowing our children to face consequences and hardships is far better for them than removing obstacles. God loves us too much not to let us face troubles. But he never leaves us to do it alone.

But we need to choose – God or the world . . .

1 Corinthians 10: 14-22: *Idol Feasts and the Lord's Supper*

¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a

participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹ Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²² Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Idolatry is putting something above God. Some people idolize money, sex, fame, power, celebrities, etc. Paul uses communion to draw us into unity with Christ who gave his life for us. Drinking from the cup reminds us of the blood Jesus was willing shed on the cross. Breaking and eating the bread reminds us of the body willingly broken for us in crucifixion. Jesus gave the ultimate gift – sacrificing himself – for our redemption. Why would we ever rely on anyone or anything else?

You can't have it both ways- honoring God while also idolizing worldly things. Paul warns that the Lord is jealous. After all the very first commandment is to have no other gods before him.

Next, Paul reminds us that we have choices to make.

1 Corinthians 10: 23-24: *The Believer's Freedom*

²³ "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

Once again, Paul is reminding us of our freedom of choice and our responsibility as believers. When we choose for ourselves, we must weigh our choices against whether they are beneficial and constructive for ourself and others. This is such a great tool for us to reflect on when called to make decisions. Think of some decisions weighing on you or a loved one. Now consider your choices in terms of how beneficial and constructive they are for yourself and others! Will my comment benefit or be constructive? Will my actions benefit or be constructive?

Pausing for this exercise could save a lot of heartache and promote healthier relationships.

1 Corinthians 10: 25-33

²⁵ Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”^[h]

²⁷ If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. ²⁹ I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— ³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

Paul has returned to the topic of eating sacrificial meat as an example for eating whatever you are given as God is the creator of it all versus being a stumbling block if someone knows you aren’t supposed to eat meat sacrificed to idols and you knowingly do so. How would this translate for us? In a lesser sense, giving up something for Lent is an agreement between us and God as a way of being mindful. If I choose to give up chocolate and I go to someone’s home for dinner and they serve their grandmother’s famous recipe of chocolate pudding, then I have the choice of just eating it and being thankful or telling everyone why I am not eating it. Paul would say the former is a good choice. However, if the person beside me knows I gave up chocolate for Lent and they see me just plowing into the dessert, then they may give them pause about my commitment to the Lord.

Ultimately, what Paul is telling his readers and us is that whatever we do, do it to glorify God. Will our actions or words benefit and be constructive or will they be a stumbling block?

Highlights:

- We all have rights and choices. Do these build up or tear down?
- Connect with others. Build trust so that you can share the good news when they ask.
- We are to live as though running a race – intentionally and with training for the purpose of success.
- Israel sets an example in the wilderness that we want to avoid.
- Idols are detrimental to us and others. Did idols die for us?
- We should consider our words and actions from the viewpoint of whether they will benefit and be constructive for ourselves and others.

Points to Ponder:

1. How are authority and example important in leaders?
2. Making ourselves slaves to others . . . thoughts?
3. What can you do to be more intentional about training your faith?
4. When is a time you have felt like the wandering Israelites?
5. Think of a time you chose words or an action that did not benefit or act constructively. How did it affect your relationship? How could you have chosen a different way that would have built up instead of tear down?

Prayer:

Lord God,

We have so much to be thankful for, but we also have so much responsibility as believers. Make us mindful of our words and actions and how they are perceived by others.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

February: 1 Corinthians 11-12

Last month, we looked at authority, freedom, and discipline. Our words and actions can be beneficial. This month, Paul shows us that's what is in our hearts matters.

But, first, here's an interesting passage about head coverings!

1 Corinthians 11: 1-16

¹Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

On Covering the Head in Worship

²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. ³But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man,^[a] and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

⁷A man ought not to cover his head,^[b] since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own^[c] head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

In Corinth, respectable women covered their bodies from head to toe. A veil covered all but their eyes according to Barclay. This marked that they were under the authority and protection of a man and it identified them as respectable and

virtuous. Wearing the veil would have been as normal for them as not wearing one is for many of us.

The passage above is actually about doing what is right for the sake of believers. It's about respect, reverence, and propriety according to my study Bible. Here is my question: did women's new freedom in Christ make them feel safe not to wear the veil because they considered their church a family? There is more intimacy among them and they were drawn to a different comfort level. Think about it: what would make respectable women accustomed to wearing a veil in public all of a sudden decide not to? It's worth considering the why though we will have no answers for our inquiry.

One thing that is also worth mentioning is that Paul isn't saying what they are doing is completely wrong. Instead he is saying that if them not wearing the veil is a hindrance to other believers, then it would be better to think of the good of the cause and comply with tradition.

Friends, this was 2000 years ago. If you think about it through that lens, this is pretty amazing. Certainly, it would be easy in our current freedoms to look down on Paul's remarks. But if you look from the lens of his own time – remarkable.

Similarly, Paul remarks that man is the glory of God but woman is the glory of man. He comments on how women have glorious hair that can even entice angels! Men would want to protect the women they love from that possibility. Archaic for us. Patriarchal. Sure. But not for them.

Ultimately, Paul encourages readers to do what is honorable as part of their culture because otherwise their witness will not be as viable. And that is Paul's ultimate concern – that we present ourselves in a way that draws others to Christ.

Paul takes this opportunity to establish the hierarchy of the church. God is the head of Christ. Christ is the head of men. Men are the head of women. This isn't a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Instead, it is a hierarchy of worldly existence. God sent Christ to earth. Man was created by God. Woman was created from man. The world likes and understands hierarchies. But I would like to take this opportunity to point out that Paul also states in Galatians 3:26-29 that in Jesus there is no hierarchy – no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if we are all one in Christ, then division and exclusivity are not okay as evidenced in the next passage.

1 Corinthians 11: 17 – 22: *Correcting an Abuse of the Lord's Supper*

¹⁷In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²²Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

It seems here that when people came together for communion in the home of a member, there was disparity in how members were treated. More affluent members were treated like honored guests and less affluent members were given whatever was left. It is not at all what Christ would have wanted. The communion table should bring all of us to our knees in equality and unity at the feet of Christ our provider and redeemer.

Paul has heard about this situation and addresses it head on. This cannot be – it is not good for the morale or the message of the church to believers.

1 Corinthians 11:22-34

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and

drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³²Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. ³⁴Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions.

Communion is supposed to be a beautiful experience – a reminder Christ himself established with his inner circle so that they would teach others after he had gone. A way to honor and remember Christ and all he does for us. If we go into communion with the wrong attitude, that lessens the experience. Our state of mind matters.

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11: Concerning Spiritual Gifts

***12** Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.*

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,^[d] and to still another the interpretation of tongues.^[e] ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

We all have different spiritual gifts and ways of serving our good God. These gifts should always work towards the common good according to Paul. These gifts could be wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues. There are others as well. Paul warns against being competitive about spiritual gifts. We are all gifted in different ways, all of which are needed. None is more important than another. Those in Corinth were becoming divisive based on spiritual gifts, thus Paul's commentary.

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31: *Unity and Diversity in the Body*

¹²Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by^[1] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of

tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues^[a]? Do all interpret? ³¹Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

This passage is a beautiful reminder of how the body of Christ should work. We are each and every one given different gifts – working as a small but important part of Christ’s body as a whole. Altogether we make an amazing creation. Working in conjunction, we accomplish far more than any of us could do on our own. We need and require each other to function at our best as a whole making a far greater impact on the world.

Think of that person in the church that sometimes drives you crazy. We need them and their gifts! Build up. Don’t tear down. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?

Love Is Indispensable

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

And this leaves us on a cliffhanger for next time!

Highlights:

- How we present ourselves as believers matters to those looking on.
- The Lord’s Supper is a beautiful gift that should be approached in the right state of mind.
- We all have different spiritual gifts. All of them are needed and important.
- We are to be like the body of Christ – working together has far greater impact than we alone could make.
- Keep in mind that Paul is writing for a different time and culture. Some details need to be viewed from within that lens. But other things have a timeless message.

Points to Ponder:

1. What are some benefits of seeing things through the lens of time and culture?
2. What really matters when we are in worship?
3. What mindset should we have going into communion?

4. Comment on some of the spiritual gifts we have among the women of our church.
5. How do we work together to form a whole ministry – a whole body of Christ?

Prayer:

Lord God,

We long to be one body using our gifts to your glory. May we value each other and build each other up. We are not in a competition. We are all needed! Help us to serve with right hearts and minds, Lord.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

March: 1 Corinthians 13-14

Last month we focused on how what is in our hearts matters. Did you have any aha moments you want to share?

This month, we will look at love and good order. Presbyterians love things to be done decently and in order, so this will be right up our alley! But, first, the beloved passage on love!

1 Corinthians 13: 1-3

If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,^[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

It doesn't matter what gifts we have or how we serve if we don't do it with love. And Paul wants to be sure we know exactly what love is and isn't.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

We could spend days on this one paragraph. It seems so self-explanatory and so common sense and yet we all fall miserably short on any given day. Love is patient. Are we? We tend to want what we want right this minute. Do we get frustrated when prayers aren't answered quickly enough? Do we speak to others patiently or frazzled? Do we make time for others or bustle about our busy day? Love is patient. Well, that steps on my busy toes.

Love is kind. When we are driving, we should be kind. When we are in line, we should be kind. When we speak to others or look at others, we should be kind. When we speak about others, we should be kind. When we disagree with someone, we should be kind. When our anger is stirred, we should respond with kindness. This is challenging stuff! Love is kind.

Love does not dishonor others. The way we act towards others and speak about them can honor and build up or it can dishonor and tear down. Totally stepping on my toes here because I definitely have vent sessions! But these vent sessions often don't help me feel better. They can make me "re-mad" as a friend calls it. But if we choose not to dishonor others, somehow, we feel better. So honoring others is both a gift to them and to yourself. Love does not dishonor others.

Love is not self-seeking. Paul has instructed over and over again that our focus should be on God and not the world. He also reminds us we are to think of how our words and actions affect others. As believers our example matters. When people look at us, they're looking for God in us. We have to be so careful of what we show them. We should seek to serve and please the Lord and in so doing we will serve and love others. Love is not self-seeking.

Love is not easily angered. Oh mercy. We get angry when we're cut off in traffic, when we have to wait for someone slower than we are in front of us, when someone doesn't take our obviously really good advice, when something messes up at the most inopportune time, when people are unkind or even downright mean, when we get frustrated or heartbroken about something that is unfair or unjust or just doesn't make sense. All these things and so much more can trigger anger within us. We're human. Notice that Paul chooses to say "don't be EASILY angered." He knows we are going to get angry, but we should strive to temper that anger - to let it be slow to rise. To encourage peace and not fuel the fire. Love is not easily angered.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. What a blessing and thank goodness! We are grateful for it. It's what we want for ourselves. But, oh my goodness, it can be difficult to do ourselves. Like I shouldn't remind my husband a billion times about that one time . . . and I shouldn't hold it against my child when . . . and what about that time in high school, I mean really? For everything I hold a grudge about, there are probably twice as many offenses I have caused. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. You know when something bad happens to that person that you dislike? You should not rejoice. In fact, you should pray for them. You know when your child messes up and gets caught? You should rejoice in the truth as a natural consequence. You know when someone

gets away with bad stuff but then gets caught, we can thank God for justice. But if we find more joy in the bad happening than in the potential for truth, that's a problem. The truth is an opportunity for things to get put right. The truth is an experience for someone's life to be changed. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Love always protects. If we hurt others with our words or actions, we are not being loving. People observe our actions. We want others to see God's love in us. It matters how we treat people. And sometimes, we need to protect people from themselves. That's tough love. Love always protects.

Love always trusts. Love is innocent and gentle and trusting. That can be hard when we've butted up against life a few times. But regardless of people and our lack of control, we can always trust God. Love always trusts.

Love always hopes. There will be times of despair and darkness in your life. There will be hardships and sorrow. But in God, we always have hope because he can make good come from anything and everything this world throws at us. Love always hopes.

Love always perseveres. Paul tells us in another letter that we should be grateful for trials because they produce endurance and our endurance grows into perseverance. That means that right in the middle of any storm, we can have peace, purpose, and God's presence. Love always perseveres.

Wait, there's more!

1 Corinthians 13: 8-13

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Love never fails. People do. Inevitably. But love doesn't because God is love. Everything else in this life will fade away. But not love. In this life, we can't understand everything that happens. We can figure things and people out to a point, but not completely. Paul says that's the way it will be in this life. Like seeing through a mirror indirectly – and please note that mirrors back then were of lesser quality than the ones we enjoy now – a murkier view. But once we're face to face with God, we will see clearly and completely just as we will be seen clearly and completely. Wholeness.

What remains will be faith, hope, and love. Faith in our almighty creator. Hope in our gracious and merciful God. Love from our good and personal Father. And love is the greatest because God is love.

1 Corinthians 14: 1-12: *Intelligibility in Worship*

14 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue^[g] does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues,^[g] but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues,^[e] unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

It seems pretty clear that someone in Corinth is speaking in tongues and no one has any idea what they're saying. Paul frowns upon this. What good is it to speak in tongues if no one else understands? Prophecy would be better because at least it is understandable. Paul's harshness seems to be calling out someone who is making a scene of their gifts of tongues to the annoyance and hindrance of other members. We can't have anything that hinders others. Paul very clearly chastises the offender. But he does try to soften it before moving on.

1 Corinthians 14: 13-25

¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. ¹⁶ Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer,^[f] say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. ²¹ In the Law it is written:

*"With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord."^[g]*

²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are

brought under judgment by all,²⁵ as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

Paul encourages the tongue speaker to pray that they can interpret so that others may participate in the experience. That is what Paul’s point is – if you have a gift, it should benefit the congregation.

Finally, Paul urges his readers to be like infants when it comes to evil – innocent. And he encourages them to be like adults in their thinking. Using the Old Testament, Paul uses the prophecy that regardless of what and how the good news is spoken, some will still not listen. Are we listening?

1 Corinthians 14: 26-40: *Good Order in Worship*

²⁶ What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.

³⁴ Women^[h] should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.^[i]

³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. ³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.^[i]

³⁹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Do you feel like Paul keeps on poking the person who was speaking in tongues? Do you get the impression it might have been a woman? This is clearly an issue that Paul spent a lot of time on.

Worship should be orderly. Only so many people should speak in tongues and only if they have interpreters. Only a few should prophesy, and if someone has a revelation the first speaker should sit down.

Friends, it seems to me that the church in Corinth had some show boaters. Paul is being very clear with instructions for worship to run more smoothly for the benefit of everyone. But in order to do so, he has had to be harsh. And this includes the edict that women should be silent in church. For every rule there is someone originally to blame for it. This letter to a specific congregation with a very clear issue in worship creates a stance that will get used against all women serving in leadership in the church. This is unfortunate. But we cannot forget that Jesus and Paul both have female coworkers in Christ. In fact, who is the one person Jesus commissions after his resurrection? A woman- Mary Magalene.

Highlights:

- Love is all the good stuff.
- Love is not all the stuff that makes people feel less than.
- Our gifts should be used only when they benefit others.
- Worship should be orderly.

Points to Ponder:

1. How do you feel love?
2. What simple and seemingly inane things have caused you harm?
3. What hinders you in worship? What boosts your worship?
4. Why do you think some will not listen to the good news?

Prayer:

Lord God,

We want to serve you and edify others with our gifts. Help us to be mindful of when we serve well and when we may be hindering others. Help us to be love in all we say and do and help us to see others with your love.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

April: 1 Corinthians 15

Did you have any insights into love and good order from last month?

This month, we look at Paul's focus on the resurrection.

The Resurrection of Christ

1 Corinthians 15: 1- 11

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

The resurrection is the clincher of the Christian faith. In the crucifixion, Christ dies for our sins, but in the resurrection, Christ conquers death for all of us. Paul tells again of this glorious occurrence. Christ died, was buried, and raised according to the prophecy of the Old Testament. He appears to Peter, then to The Twelve (who would actually be eleven at that point), then 500 of the brothers and sisters, then to his brother James, and then to Paul. These appearances to multiple groups is important because it establishes multiple eyewitnesses to the resurrection. Many different people could attest to seeing the risen Christ at different times and occasions. I love William Barclay's commentary because he points out that the visits to Peter and James are made to two individuals who hurt Christ. Peter denies

him 3 times before the rooster crows and James, his brother, doubted Jesus. And yet Christ appears to them in a way to offer consolation and comfort in their time of distress for their failing Jesus.

And yet, isn't this also the case for Paul. He has been passionate about persecuting Christ's following until Jesus meets him on the road to Damascus showing him the error of his ways and transforming his life at a 180-degree angle. Paul didn't get to be part of the original movement, but he gets adopted in after the resurrection. Paul is quick to credit God for his ministry.

1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 19: *The Resurrection of the Dead*

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Apparently, a concern has come to Paul's attention that some people are denying the resurrection of the dead. Paul is trying to show that if you don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, then Christ wasn't resurrected, then our faith is false and there is no hope of life after death. Then we would only have our limited lifetime to hope in Christ and not anything after. That would be very sad indeed.

1 Corinthians 15: 20- 28

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be

destroyed is death. ²⁷ For he “has put everything under his feet.”^[c] Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Paul takes us back to creation and Adam as the conveyor of sin for all of us. (Isn't it nice to get a reprieve from blaming Eve?) It makes sense that Jesus should come to take away sin for all of us. Paul affirms that Christ has indeed risen from the dead as the “firstfruits.” Barclay says the firstfruits, which would remind Jews of the Feast of Passover when the practice was to harvest barley from a common field, not from a purposely prepared garden or orchard. The barley is presented to the Temple where it is threshed, dried over fire, and sifted to make flour to offer to God. Only after this practice were the shops allowed to sell barley, so the firstfruits were a sign of the coming harvest. These firstfruits are compared to Christ's resurrection and signify that he is the first preparing the way for the rest of us. 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15: 29-34

²⁹ Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? ³⁰ And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ³¹ I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³² If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

“Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die.”^[d]

³³ Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”^[e] ³⁴ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

Here there seems to be a practice that has come to Paul's attention where others are being baptized in the name of someone else. Why would we baptize in the name of the dead if there is no heaven? Paul is questioning their beliefs and practices. Why would we all put ourselves at risk of persecution if there is no after life. Why would we not just eat, drink, and be merry with what time we have on earth? All this is

Paul's way of warning his readers that they need to use caution. Be careful who they allow to influence them and hold fast to the faith in Christ conveyed by Paul.

1 Corinthians 15: 35-54: *The Resurrected Body*

³⁵ But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" ³⁶ How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. ³⁹ Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. ⁴⁰ There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. ⁴¹ The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

⁴² So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"^[i]; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we^[g] bear the image of the heavenly man.

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."^[h]

The resurrection of the body is a thing of mystery for when Jesus was resurrected his friends did not recognize him. They did, however, recognize his voice and his actions. William Barclay says that our resurrected body will contain our personality. Paul says we will be like a seed that is dissolved into the earth and resurrected into a plant. The essence of the seed is the same but the form is different. We love to also consider the metaphor of the caterpillar going into a cocoon and evolving into a butterfly. These earthly processes make sense to us even if we can't quite fathom what a spiritual body might look like.

1 Corinthians 15: 55- 58

*⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"^[1]*

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Ultimately, we need to remember that death has been overcome. Christ has gone ahead to prepare a room for us, leading the way for us through death and into life eternal. For this reason, we can stand firm! We can believe! Even if it isn't completely clear to us, we can trust our good God.

Highlights:

- Resurrection is crucial to our faith.
- Resurrection means we have a better life ahead and we should live accordingly.
- Our bodies will be resurrected but not the same bodies we have now.
- Christ overcomes death so that we too have hope of life beyond death.

Points to Ponder:

1. Comment on the use of Adam, a living being, and Christ, a life-giving spirit, as bookends for sin.

2. If there were no afterlife, how would we live?
3. Discuss the idea of not recognizing a spiritual body visually but still recognizing personality.
4. Comment on the processes for seeds and butterflies and how they give us hope for our own resurrection one day.
5. Death is defeated. What does that mean to you?

Prayer:

Lord God,

You sent Jesus to set an example and show us who you really are. The fact that you want us to be with you for a blissful eternity is hard to believe. But we are so grateful and we ask that you would help our unbelief.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

May: 1 Corinthians 16

Last month, we walked with Paul as he wrote about the resurrection. Do you have any observations to share in that regard?

This month, we end with Paul offering us the value of practical deeds. One very practical thing we do as a church is to collect offerings.

1 Corinthians 16: 1 – 4: *he Collection for the Lord's People*

¹Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ²On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. ³Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

This is the final chapter of his letter to the Corinthians and Paul has some final instructions of which to remind them. The first is about the collection or offering as we now say in many churches. The Jews and the Greeks had systems whereby people down on their luck could be helped and Paul wanted these churches to have the same opportunity. These gifts were collected and sent to Jerusalem for use there. Paul instructs that the amount we put aside should be in keeping with our income, that we should set aside with regularity, and given when the time is right. Making the practice of putting aside money for the church has been around a long time. Taxes must be paid but we get to choose freely to give to the church.

1 Corinthians 16: 5-12: *Personal Requests*

⁵After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. ⁶Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

¹⁰When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. ¹¹No one, then, should treat

him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.

¹²Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.

Paul is looking forward to a visit with the church of Corinth. But he admits that his ministry in Ephesus is newer and he is still meeting opposition, so he wants to try to stabilize that church first. He is sending Timothy to Corinth and warns them to treat him with respect- Timothy is younger in age and in the faith, but he is doing the work of the Lord. Then he advises them to send Timothy along in peace because Paul is expecting him and the brothers. This last part is odd to me – almost as though Paul fears they will not let Timothy leave or they will treat him poorly. And then he tells the church that Apollos is “quite unwilling” to return right now, but he will when he can. I wonder if Corinth was hard on their leaders? Or perhaps needy and draining? This is the same Apollos who in the beginning people were glorifying as being his followers. So, perhaps Apollos wants to steer clear of that?

1 Corinthians 16: 13-18

¹³Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. ¹⁴Do everything in love.

¹⁵You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, ¹⁶to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it. ¹⁷I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. ¹⁸For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.

Paul seems led to do what every mother does when her child leaves home – cram all the advice they can think of into one sentence. Be careful, make good choices, we'll miss you, and we love you! Sound familiar? Here is Paul's version:

- Be on your guard – be careful, be watchful, there are things that are not good for you out there and I worry about you.
- Stand firm in the faith – no matter what comes your way, keep the faith. God is with you. God is your strength.

- Be courageous – to have courage is to face what comes your way with the knowledge that God is with you. This goes hand in hand with the next one.
- Be strong – this means fortifying yourself for you never know how long your trial will be. Our strength is in God and that will never fail, but we must not assume things will happen quickly for we all know God’s timing is not always our timing. We will need God’s strength.
- Do everything in love – the bottom line is always love. This is the core of who God is, the crux of Jesus’ message to us, and the reason we have the gift of the Holy Spirit within us – love. We have received it and we are to let it overflow in us to share with others.

Paul goes back to remembering fellow servants for Christ – Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. Paul credits them with refreshing his spirit and that of the church in Corinth. People who can do that deserve recognition according to Paul. But don’t miss the dig that Paul slides in there when he says Corinth had not been able to provide what these men did. Corinth, rather than being refreshing, must have been taxing especially in light of all we have seen being addressed in this letter.

1 Corinthians 16: 19-24: *Final Greetings*

¹⁹*The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla^[a] greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. ²⁰All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

²¹*I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.*

²²*If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord^[b]!*

²³*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.*

²⁴*My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.^[c]*

At the end of the letter, now that Paul has addressed all the topics that concerned him, we see greetings from the church in Asia and from Priscilla and Aquila who are fellow tent makers like Paul and who open their home to serve as a church. All the brothers and sisters in Ephesus send greetings. Paul encourages the Corinthians to greet each other with a holy kiss. This is like passing the peace for us. Their churches were smaller and more intimate – people knew each other well and they

would kiss a cheek or a hand – men to men and women to women according to Barclay. However, as the church has gotten bigger, we don't always know each other well enough to feel comfortable kissing each other modestly and so we shake hands, hug, wave, nod our heads, etc. as we pass the peace.

This letter is in Greek and recorded by a secretary for Paul, but Paul's greeting at the end is in his own hand and he included a phrase "Come, Lord" in Aramaic which translates to *maranatha* meaning the Lord is at hand. Barclay suggests this term in the Aramaic was like a catch phrase people would use as a reminder that Jesus would return soon and so we should be ready and live accordingly.

Paul closes this letter of admonishment and concern with grace and peace ending in reconciliation and love. We should always strive to do the same.

Highlights:

- It is important to save what we can on a regular basis to give for God's people.
- There are so many people out there who care about us and have the highest hopes and best intentions for us.
- Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong; do everything in love.
- The Lord is at hand!
- Grace and peace and love always.

Points to Ponder:

1. We like to talk about tithes along with talents and time. Why is this a good idea?
2. Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong; do everything in love. Which of these is the hardest for you?
3. What does it mean to have our spirit refreshed?
4. The Lord is at hand! Why is this a good mantra regardless of whether he is at hand or not?
5. What do grace and peace look like today? Why should we strive to close with reconciliation in our encounters?

Prayer:

Lord God,

We want to give to you. We don't always know how best to do that. Please help us discern how to give of our time, talents, and tithe. Lord, for each of us is desperately needed in multiple ways. May we heed caution, have courage and strength in you, and make love our very heartbeat and breath. May your grace and peace emanate from us in all we do and say.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.