



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
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AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 7

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21, Human vs. divine wisdom

OUTLINE: Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 4:6-21, Fools for Christ

- 4:6-7 Recipients of God's grace & blessings
- 4:8-13 Bursting the bubble of human pride
- 4:14-21 Potential face to face confrontation

In many of his letters Paul begins with a doctrinal foundation on which he will build his discussion of various practical matters. In 1 Corinthians, that foundation is presented in chapters 1-4 and states that all Christians are beneficiaries equally of the grace of God expressed in the crucifixion of Christ. While we may have different gifts, styles and personalities, we should praise and follow no one but Christ.

The crucifixion of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the immense difference between what the world calls wise and powerful, and the true wisdom and power of God. Our culture assumes the normalcy and necessity of achieving greatness by showing our superiority over others, by claiming glory and privilege over those we have surpassed, and by expressing our independence from them. This entire attitude, says Paul, is contrary to the example and message of Christ who was crucified to save us, unite us, and lead us in serving one another.

As he brings his opening statement to a close, Paul presents his most stinging rebuke yet in the form of a sarcastic "recognition" that the apostles of Jesus were "fools for Christ" when they compared their "achievements" with those of many Corinthian Christians. He concludes this section with a promise to confront them in person if necessary. He will then be ready to address, beginning in chapter 5, specific areas where the Corinthians were following the wisdom of the world while neglecting and living contrary to the wisdom of God.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 4:6-7, Recipients of God's grace & blessings

- 1. What lesson did Paul present earlier (3:18-22) when he made a three-fold connection between the deceptive pride of the Corinthians, quotations from "what is written" in the Old Testament, and the efforts of himself, Apollos and Cephas?**

In 3:18-22, Paul warned the Corinthians against deceiving themselves if they justified the congregational divisions caused by elevating Paul, Apollos or Cephas, despite the warnings of Job 5:13 & Psalms 94:11 against following the wisdom of the world.

“What is written” could refer to any and all teachings of the Old Testament, but it seems more likely that Paul is thinking of references that he has already made just a few verses earlier in this letter. Remember that the chapter divisions are not from Paul, and this statement is separated by only a few verses from the warning of 3:18-22.

Paul’s conscience was clear that he did not desire or approve of any division associated with his name (4:1-5). This might also imply that not only did Paul have a clear conscience in this matter, but he assumed that Apollos also had a clear conscience and would disapprove of such divisions. Other teachers might not have had such pure motives.

- 2. This is the first of several uses in this letter of the expression “puffed up” (cf. 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). What is the divisive outcome of being puffed up that Paul warns against? Note how it refers directly to the division first mentioned in 1:10-15.**

It was inevitable that if they were arrogant because they followed one person (“on behalf of one”), it invariably divided them from those who followed another person (“against the other”). To raise up one was to diminish another.

- 3. The Greek word translated “puffed up” is used in the New Testament only in the above-mentioned verses of 1 Corinthians and in Colossians 2:18. What is the cause of being “puffed up” according to Colossians 2:18, and what is the cause identified in 1 Corinthians?**

Colossians 2:18 says that a “fleshly mind” (ESV, sensuous mind) is the cause. That is very similar to 1 Corinthians where it is attributed to following the wisdom (or thinking) of the world rather than “what is written.” In 1 Cor 13, Paul links being puffed up to a lack of godly love.

- 4. Answer the question posed by Paul in the first phrase of verse 7. In other words, every member of the church is unique and has particular talents just as a human body benefits from the unique capabilities of each body part (1 Corinthians 12). Who made us this way and gives us the abilities we have? What would Paul think of the concept of a “self-made man?”**

It is a basic biblical truth that we are made by God. Beginning with Adam and Eve, we are made and gifted by God. But how we use our giftedness is up to us, whether according to our wisdom or God's. No one is truly "self-made."

- 5. In 1 Cor 4:7, every use of the pronoun "you" is singular. In verses 6 & 8, every "you" and "your" is plural. Why do you think Paul made this distinction in verse 7?**

It may be that the attitudes of verses 6 & 8 were collective and shared by many in the congregation, but Paul wanted to be more emphatic in saying that our failure to recognize that every good gift is from God is a very personal problem. He wanted each member to be personally thankful to God for the abilities he has given us and to see that we will be held personally responsible for how we use our gifts, as well as being called to appreciate the value of our brothers and sisters.

The King James Bible can be used to verify that second person pronouns are singular or plural.

- Singular: thou, thee, thy (or thine)
- Plural: ye, you, your

1 Corinthians 4:8-13, Bursting the bubble of human pride

- 6. Who is the "we" or "us" in verses 8-13?**

Clearly Paul is pitting the Corinthians, in their arrogance, against the life-long sacrifices of the apostles. Apostles are directly identified in verse 9.

- 7. What was the purpose and power of contrasting this particular group (us) against the members of the Corinthian church (you)?**

If anyone in the early church could have claimed to be more "Spirit-filled" and important in the early church, it would have been the apostles. Nevertheless, they all suffered many trials in their service to the gospel.

- 8. Paul presents this group (us) with a shocking list of descriptive terms. What are those terms? Who else in the New Testament is sometimes described in a similar way?**

Not reigning, last, condemned, a spectacle, fools, weak, dishonored, hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless, self-employed, reviled, persecuted, defamed, filth and an offscouring.

The apostles were treated much like Christ was treated (e.g., Matthew 8:20; Philippians 2:5-8; 1 Peter 2:21-24, etc.).

9. Which standard of wisdom would deem the Corinthian's self-evaluation to be accurate, and which standard of wisdom would consider Paul's self-evaluation to be accurate?

The wisdom of the world would not have much admiration for the material success and accomplishments of Paul (or the other apostles). Only by worldly, non-spiritual wisdom could the Corinthians justify their goals and attitudes towards each other and towards Paul.

10. How does this passage build on or illustrate earlier statements such as 1:26-31; 2:14?

Worldly attitudes could never appreciate the totally different worldview to which Christians are called. Nor could a harmonious, God-pleasing church be built with the wisdom of the world.

11. Should we take verse 10 as literal truth or facetious irony?

This is biting sarcasm. In no way, according to God's wisdom, were the divided Corinthians spiritually more mature than Paul or the other apostles, though by worldly standards one might come to a different conclusion.

1 Corinthians 4:14-21, Potential face to face confrontation

In this paragraph, Paul wraps up his opening statement. Through the crucifixion of Jesus, God has demonstrated the radical differences between His wisdom and that of the world. This same difference between true spirituality and worldly thinking is the foundation for the distinctiveness of Christian thought and practice. When we accept the servanthood taught by the wisdom of God, we will find the solutions to the problems that were plaguing the Corinthian church. Paul will begin his treatment of those problems in the next chapter.

But first, Paul assures his readers of his genuine concern for their well-being. Just as a father with his children, Paul would warn them, send a trusted friend to encourage them, and, if necessary, visit them in person.

12. How would you compare the tone adopted by Paul in this paragraph (vv. 14-21) as compared to verses 8-13? Why do you think he chose to use both approaches, and why does he conclude this section with this tone?

The preceding section (8-13) is pretty brutal with the use of sarcasm. This one is gentler and more encouraging. Claiming a paternal relationship to them is not intended to establish some sort of spiritual hierarchy, but to express the depth of his concern for them. He wanted them to wake up to the serious nature of their situation, but he also wants to see them grow as Christians and as a congregation.

13. Words can sometimes be somewhat fluid in their meaning depending on the context. What is the difference here between shaming and warning (ESV: admonish)?

Shaming would have the intention of making them feel bad about themselves and their actions, but wouldn't necessarily produce positive change. Shame is often a feeling based on emotion with no real factual cause or productive outcome.

Warning, on the other hand, presents evidence of factual error with a clear purpose of producing growth and improvement.

14. Paul wrote "these things" (NIV: "this") to warn rather than to shame. To what "things" is he referring?

It could be a reference to the stinging sarcasm of the preceding paragraph, but it is more likely that he is referring to everything written so far in the letter (cf. 4:6). He has discussed the wisdom of God in sending Christ to the cross. He has also denounced the division of the Corinthian church because they didn't recognize the radical difference between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom. If this is the case, it serves as a clear indication that this paragraph is indeed the conclusion of his opening remarks.

15. Paul has made it clear that he doesn't want "followers" in the way the Corinthians were following Paul, Apollos or Cephas. Yet, he calls for them to imitate him (v. 16). What's the difference between following and imitating? What actions or attitudes has Paul shown and taught that should be imitated?

He did not want to be followed in the sense of inferior Christians following someone who claimed to be their leader. As someone to imitate, he was a steward and a servant who accepted hardship and deprivation for the good of others and especially to elevate Christ. If being reviled by the world would elevate Jesus and help Christians be faithful to God, he was more than willing to accept that humble role. In such a role, he wanted to be imitated.