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Lesson 62- An Overview of First Corinthians

As we continue our study in the book of Acts we find ourselves in Acts 19 as Paul is stationed in Ephesus on his 3rd missionary journey. And we learned last week of his great work in Ephesus, of which is by far the most fruitful of his four journeys and I would conjecture these four years (54-58) are his most productive years in his 30 years of ministry. Paul was in Ephesus for three years, two of which were spent teaching a Bible study daily in the school of Tyrannus. And we saw the fruit of this Bible study, every day, 5 hours of day in the Word changed the world. And from this all of Asia heard the Word of the Lord Jesus, Acts 19:10. But not only was Asia being edified during this time in Ephesus. We also learn that Paul had many dealings with the church in Corinth during these four years; four letters and two personal visits detailed in the outline from last week.

It is clear that Paul had a deep concern for this Corinthian church and out of this concern and love for the brethren, he writes these four letters, two of which are still extant, we know them as 1 and 2 Corinthians. The other two letters; “previous letter,” **1 Cor 5:9**; and the “severe letter,” **2 Cor 2:4**; these two references are only what we know of these letters. It is my conjecture that Paul wrote the “previous letter” within the first three months of coming to Ephesus. Which then resulted in a return letter written by the household of Chloe and brought over to Ephesus by the hand of Apollos. It is also possible that three other representatives from Corinth came with Apollos, 1 Cor 16:15-17, and delivered this letter which prompted Paul to write what we know as the letter of 1 Corinthians.

Understanding the context surrounding this letter is vital to fully understanding this letter. 1 Corinthians covers a wide range of doctrine that can seem scattered, but when you understand that Paul is systematically answering a list of questions, and giving clarity to many grey areas of Christianity, it gives us a better understanding of this letter and it becomes a letter of doctrine that we as Christians 2,000 years later can still relate to and help guide our life today. Topics such as divisions in the church; spiritual immaturity; sexual immorality and the tolerance of sin in the church; marriage; idolatry; communion and the Lord’s Supper; Spiritual gifts; and the Resurrection. Paul goes into great length on each of these subjects helping us understand Truth and the walk of our Christian life.

One overarching theme throughout this letter is the boast of pride within the church. Six times during this letter he uses the word, φουσιώω- meaning “puffed up with pride,” 1 Cor 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4. And all through this letter we learn that the agape love of God and our continual focus on Jesus Christ is the only remedy to humble the prideful spirit and bring unity into the church.

It is my goal today to lightly touch on all 16 chapters giving an overview to this great epistle. And in doing so we will see Paul’s logic as he steps through each of these topics addressing the questions that these Corinthian saints were asking Paul.

Before we get into the letter, another important background we must understand is the moral state of the city of Corinth. These believers were living in the center of immorality and debauchery. To be a Corinthian was synonymous with loose living. The word Κορινθιαζομαι- to Corinthianize was to practice whoredome and fornication. Strabo tells us in the temple of Venus at Corinth there was the Sanctuary of Aphrodite which possessed more than 1,000 priestesses who would practice prostitution in honor of the goddess Aphrodite. Corinth was a wicked city filled with perverse immorality and demon worship. These Corinthian believers had been brought out from darkness into the Light, such were some of you, 1 Cor 6:9-11, but along with the regeneration of the spirit, there must also be a renewing of the mind unto holiness that every believer must pursue by the power of the Holy Spirit, Rom 12:2. This is the lifelong walk of Sanctification. The progression of maturing into Christ-likeness and becoming holy just as He is holy. No one on this side of heaven ever attains to perfect holiness, but we can increasingly walk in

holiness as we mature into His glory, 2 Cor 3:18. Along with the immoral state of this city, the believers also had to contend with the false teachings of the Judaizers, the Greek philosophers, namely the Epicureans and the Stoics (dualism of philosophers rooted in the pride of man), and the infiltration of the Gnostic heresies starting to be formed in the first century. Paul addresses this in the first chapter, **1 Cor 1:22-25**. Let's start with his introduction in chapter 1. Notice where Paul's focus always is... Jesus Christ and His glorious return, **1 Cor 1:7-9**. He begins and ends this epistle with the expectation of our Savior's return and our resurrection with Him face to face, **1 Cor 15:51-52; 16:22**- Maranatha! The cry of the early church... O Lord come! After his intro Paul addresses the questions from Chloe's letter, **1 Cor 1:11; 7:1**. And he starts with the first topic:

Divisions within the church, chapters 1-4

This topic spans chapters 1-4, **1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:21-23**. Within these four chapters we see the pride of man creeping in, **1 Cor 4:6**. The wisdom man creates a boast that puffs up man. This is why God chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, **1 Cor 1:27-29**. The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, 1 Cor 1:18, but it was the power of the cross that defeated the enemy and He did it completely by surprise, **1 Cor 2:7-8**. But God has revealed the deep things of God to us through His Spirit, **1 Cor 2:10**. God has revealed these deep things to those who have a desire to hear, but this revelation comes only to those who are maturing in Him. And unfortunately, many of the Corinthian believers were still spiritually immature, **1 Cor 3:1-4**. And this immaturity that was causing these divisions was rooted in pride. Notice how Paul as a loving shepherd begins to knock this pride out of them, **1 Cor 4:6-21**.

Sexual immorality and tolerating sin, chapters 5-6

Paul addresses three issues in this section and they all stem from a prideful spirit; 1) incest, 2) boasting in their toleration of sin in the church, 3) (as a side note) bringing accusations against each other in heathen courts. These result from a lack of love for one another. First Paul addresses the sexual immoral man, but within the same breath he rebukes the church for boasting in their tolerance of this sin, **1 Cor 5:1-7**. This is a sensitive issue, but it has to do with the heart. This immoral man did not have a repentant heart. He was gladly living in sin and even more, the church was encouraging this behavior. If this brother had a humble, repentant heart, Paul would tell them to forgive him and help this man walk through this sin. But it is obvious that this man was a bad seed and as a good shepherd must protect the flock, Paul is telling the elders to put away this evil person, 1 Cor 5:13.

Then while Paul is on the topic of judging sin, almost as a side note, he tells them that it should not be that a brother goes to court against another brother. But they should work this out themselves within the church. Paul then goes back to addressing sexual immorality and the severity of this sin, **1 Cor 6:15-20**.

The conduct of marriage, chapter 7

Stemming from the topic of sexual immorality, Paul then goes to the next question about the conduct of marriage, **1 Cor 7:1-2**. In a nutshell, Paul gives the definition of God's ideal on marriage. Basically, stay pure until you're married, then stay married until you're dead. But because we are dealing with flawed people, God's ideal isn't always the case, so Paul goes into the grey areas concerning marriage, divorce, remarrying, widows, unbelievers with believers.

Things offered to idols, chapter 8

This again goes back to pride and Paul addresses this first thing, **1 Cor 8:1-3**. Notice that love is always the remedy for pride. This knowledge was puffing them up with pride. The γυνώσις, of our freedom in Christ was being used against other believers with a weak conscience. Here we see the Gnostic heresy coming into the church. Pride based on their knowledge and using it against a brother. This isn't loving the brethren, **1 Cor 8:7-13**.

Paul defends his apostleship, chapter 9

These false teachers infiltrating the church were attacking the Apostleship of Paul. Paul defends his calling and shows the humility of his ministry by not even taking any money from them, but preaching the gospel at no charge, but only out of his love for the gospel and others, **1 Cor 9:1-3, 12, 17, 22-27**.

Oneness of the Body of Christ, chapter 10

After giving several Old Testament examples of oneness, Paul gives another warning against pride, 1 Cor 10:1-6, 12. Paul then relates this back to the prideful hurting the conscience of other believers by eating things sacrificed to demons, 1 Cor 10:23-33.

Order of Authority and Communion, chapter 11

Paul then goes on to address order within the church reminding them that God is the head, then Christ, then man, then woman, **1 Cor 11:1-3**. Pride will always readjust this order and cause disorder and divisions in the church, **1 Cor 11:17-22**.

Spiritual Gifts, chapters 12-14

Our Christian unity in love standing against pride is the ongoing theme of this letter. In these three chapters, Paul stresses the oneness we have in Christ, but yet with diversities within the members, **1 Cor 12:12-14, 4-11**. These gifts are given as He wills, not on demand as I will. Because if the gift glorifies anyone else but God, it starts to build up a sense of pride and boastfulness. Paul warns against this and tells us to focus on Jesus. He says desire Spiritual gifts, but keep your focus on Jesus, **1 Cor 12:31; 13:1-13**. In chapter 14 Paul shows us this balance, **1 Cor 14:1**- pursue love and desire spiritual gifts. And the entire purpose of spiritual gifts is to edify the body of Christ, **1 Cor 14:5, 12, 26, 40**. God is a God of order.

The Resurrection, chapter 15

Paul brings them back to the stance of the Christian... hold fast the Word. Stand fast in the faith and in the hope of our Salvation in Him. Chapter 15 is probably the best description and explanation of our resurrection and our glorification in Him when we receive our glorified bodies at the rapture.

Paul begins with the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus. Greek philosophy and Gnostic heresy was creeping into the church and people were teaching that there was no resurrection of the dead. So Paul says if Christ is not risen we are still dead in our sins, **1 Cor 15:12-19**.

After proving the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus, Paul then tells us that we too have been raised up and in the future will receive a physical resurrection with Christ when we see Him face to face, **1 Cor 15:20-23, 50-52**.

Final Salutation, chapter 16

Paul wraps us his letter with the mentioning of his plans to see them and the brethren working with him. But notice the admonition to stand strong waiting for our Lord, **1 Cor 16:13; 22**. The blessed Hope of His return is at the forefront of Paul's mind as he is encouraging the saints in the faith.