

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 6

### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–3:23

#### THE BACKGROUND

As a church-planting missionary, Paul invested a year and a half of ministry in Corinth. In Acts 18:8 Luke noted that “many of the Corinthians” touched by the good news “believed and were baptized.” These believers formed a local church, and Paul enjoyed “teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11). After Paul left Corinth, a brilliant Bible teacher named Apollos arrived there and “greatly helped those who had believed” (Acts 18:27).

Some time later while Paul was in Ephesus (Acts 19), he received news about the Corinthian believers from various sources. One such source — identified as “members of Chloe’s household” (1 Corinthians 1:11) — reported the unsettling information that the congregation in Corinth was experiencing quarrels and divisions among themselves. Although this problem was not the only one the Corinthians were facing, it was so serious it became the issue Paul chose to address first in his lengthy response to them.

As we dive into this study, we can picture believers in Corinth who had known Jesus as Lord for no more than five years. They had been “doing church” for approximately five years. No doubt they were eager to hear from Paul, their dear friend, who had taken the trouble to write them from Ephesus. The Corinthian Christians knew they had problems — as well as many questions. This lesson, like all those we will study during the next three months, will help us answer our overall study theme question, “What’s a New Testament Church Like?”

#### 1. ADDRESS THE SYMPTOM: DIVISION

##### (1 CORINTHIANS 1:10)

Paul did not beat around the bush. He identified four cliques that had emerged in the Corinthian church. As he began, he emphasized that one way to promote unity in the church was to focus on areas where the Christians agreed rather than on areas where they disagreed.

**Verse 10:** *Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.*

The exhortation “now I urge you, brothers” is similar to Paul’s better-known appeal in Romans 12:1. In this

phrase he used a form of a verb also meaning “to appeal to” or “to plead” that indicates an ongoing appeal. Like an older brother, he reminded the Corinthians his plea involved a family matter. The family head was none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, whose reputation was on the line because of the way the Corinthians were behaving.

The admonition to say the same thing refers to having the same convictions on basic doctrines (such as the bodily resurrection of Christ) rather than uniformity about secondary matters (such as preferences in hymn selection). Divisions translates a word in the original Greek language related to our English term *schism*. The Greek noun is associated with a verb meaning “to tear” or “to split.” The opposite of this rending or tearing is to be united with the same understanding about Christ and the gospel and to have the same conviction about the purpose of the church.

#### 2. DIAGNOSE THE ILLNESS: SIN

##### (1 CORINTHIANS 1:21-25)

In Paul’s time — not unlike our own time — a promise of power and wisdom often received great attention. Yet the gospel message had come without obvious external displays of power and wisdom. Thus, the way persons responded to the gospel demonstrated whether they were seeking something other than worldly power and wisdom.

On one hand, those who had rejected the gospel message considered it foolishness (1:18). On the other hand, those who embraced it (as the Corinthians had) experienced God’s mighty power to save. God’s pattern of working in ways that contradict what human scholars and philosophers propounded was nothing new. Paul’s quotation of Isaiah 29:14 showed that His usual way is to make “the world’s wisdom foolish” (1 Corinthians 1:20). In verses 21-25, Paul contrasted the wisdom of the gospel message to mere human wisdom.

**Verse 21:** *For since, in God’s wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the message preached.*

God’s wisdom determined that brilliant intellectual inquiry is doomed to fail as a way of salvation. The world did not (and cannot) know God through wisdom based on human reasoning. God developed a different plan of salvation. His wise plan was to save those who believe through the sharing of a message that on the surface

seems foolishness: Christ died to save sinners. Paul’s point was that the world considers the content of the Christian message as foolish or meaningless.

**Verse 22:** *For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom,*

Various cultures and ethnic groups crave different experiences as attempts to make life purposeful. In Paul’s observation, the Jews ask for signs (miracles), while the Greeks seek wisdom (through intellectual pursuits and philosophy).

But even when they are present, signs, intellectual pursuits, and philosophy are not enough. Paul’s own involvement in miraculous signs sometimes had results he did not intend (Acts 14:8-18). His encounter with the philosophers of Athens was not well received by some members of his audience (Acts 17:16-34).

**Verse 23:** *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.*

What had transformed the Corinthians? Not a miraculous sign they witnessed or a brilliant speech. Rather, they heard Paul preach Christ crucified. In the Jewish mind-set, the Messiah would come as a powerful King who would crush all opposition. Thus, a crucified Messiah was as far from a miraculous sign as Jews could imagine. In the Gentile mind-set, it was sheer foolishness to hear that salvation had been secured by an obscure Galilean Jew.

**Verse 24:** *Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God’s power and God’s wisdom,*

For many people of New Testament times, the world was divided into two groups: Jews and Greeks. The term Greeks was often used interchangeably with the term “Gentiles.” Yet Paul knew there was a third group, whom God had made alive and called out of the other two groups. The called are the same as “us who are being saved” (1 Corinthians 1:18) or “those who believe” (1:21).

The reality is that Christ is God’s power — not the powerless crucified Victim resisting Jews thought Him to be. He is God’s wisdom — not a foolish Individual whom Gentiles mocked while considering themselves wise.

**Verse 25:** *because God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

God’s plan of salvation has reversed what humans, thinking naturalistically, expected. Ironically, human

wisdom rejected as foolish what turned out to be truly wise and human strength dismissed as weakness what turned out to be truly strong: God's sending His Son to die on a cross for our sins.

Paul proclaimed the truth of the gospel, showing the superiority of God's wisdom to that of the world. In the next few verses, Paul reminded the Corinthians that the greatness and glory of the church, built on what seemed a weak and foolish plan from a worldly perspective, could be accounted for only as a work of God.

### 3. ADMINISTER THE CURE: THE GOSPEL (1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31)

**Verse 26:** *Brothers, consider your calling: not many are wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth.*

According to the world's understanding of status, the Corinthian church had neither prestige nor high rank — social, economic, or otherwise. The phrase not many are wise suggests few, if any, Corinthians were highly educated. The expression not many powerful points to the lack of economic or political clout among the church members. The comment not many of noble birth indicates most of these Christians were from the lower social classes.

**Verse 27:** *Instead, God has chosen the world's foolish things to shame the wise, and God has chosen the world's weak things to shame the strong.*

Jesus declared that the church around the world and throughout time will grow by His initiative: "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). This fact is true for every local congregation as well. Thus, twice in verse 27 Paul wrote "God has chosen." In order to shame the wise (that is, to show that it isn't by intelligence or smart thinking that someone becomes part of God's family) and in order to shame the strong (that is, to show that it isn't because of power or social status that someone is called to be a believer), the Lord chose people the world did not respect.

**Verse 28:** *God has chosen the world's insignificant and despised things—the things viewed as nothing—so He might bring to nothing the things that are viewed as something,*

The God whose "foolishness" is wiser than all human wisdom, and whose "weakness" is more powerful than all human strength has something to demonstrate by putting foolish, weak persons into His congregations. No doubt elite members of Corinthian society looked down

on Christians as insignificant and despised things. Such people who view themselves as something in their own eyes will ultimately come to nothing in His eyes.

Here is another great reversal, as in verse 25. In that verse, God's "foolishness" and "weakness" reversed the world's expectations for the way salvation has been provided. In verse 28, God's viewpoint is again the reverse of the world's perspective. He has chosen lowly people to be His own people.

**Verse 29:** *so that no one can boast in His presence.*

The Lord saves. Human ability and human wisdom cannot save. The only kind of persons who become Christians are those who understand they are weak, powerless sinners. The result is that no one can boast before God that he or she is smart enough or Jewish enough or strong enough or Baptist enough or \_\_\_\_\_ enough to be included in His family. In God's presence, no one can legitimately boast.

**Verse 30:** *But from Him you are in Christ Jesus, who for us became wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,*

What is the source of salvation? It is from the Lord. What is the means of salvation? It comes through our union with Christ Jesus by faith. United to Him, we gain what we so sorely lack in ourselves. We lacked wisdom. For us He became wisdom. We were unrighteous. For us, He provided righteousness. The Greek word translated "righteousness" is related to the terms often translated "justify" and "justification."

We were unholy. For us, He provided sanctification, a reference to the process of growing in Christlikeness. We were in bondage to sin. For us, Christ provided redemption, originally a reference to the price paid to ransom a slave and refers here to Christ's death as the payment for sin.

**Verse 31:** *in order that, as it is written: The one who boasts must boast in the Lord.*

What a great salvation! God has saved foolish, unrighteous, unholy slaves to sin! All the glory, all the boasting, must go to the Lord. Paul quoted Jeremiah 9:24. In the verse's original setting, the Lord was challenging His people not to boast in human cleverness, strength, or wealth but rather to recognize that the only appropriate basis for boasting is in knowing the Lord. Paul applied the Jeremiah text to the Corinthians, who were boasting in their party alignment (Paul, Peter, Apollos). Some may even have been boasting in their

wisdom, power, or wealth. Paul hoped that when the Corinthians stopped boasting in themselves, they would experience reconciliation with one another. One sure way for a church to promote unity among its members is to focus all the glory and boasting on the work God has accomplished in bringing that church into existence and sustaining its life.

### 4. HEAL THE BODY: GOD'S CHURCH (1 CORINTHIANS 3:9-10,16-17)

**Verse 9:** *For we are God's co-workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

The pronoun "we" here refers to Paul and Apollos. The application is to any person who has been involved in church leadership. Such leaders have the great privilege of being God's co-workers. They should never be lifted up as leaders of a church faction. The pronoun "you" in the context is plural, referring to the congregation as a whole rather than to individual believers. A church is like a field or a building. The emphasis is on the word God's, repeated twice. Because the church belongs to God, leaders must be careful how they do their work.

**Verse 10:** *According to God's grace that was given to me, as a skilled master builder I have laid a foundation, and another builds on it. But each one must be careful how he builds on it,*

Paul was always aware that it was God's grace, God's undeserved favor, which put him in the place of laying a foundation as the church planter in Corinth. He therefore had been responsible to work carefully unto the Lord as a skilled master builder. Later, Apollos had come along (another builds on it). Apollos was equally responsible to be careful how he builds. This instruction has implications for every person involved in congregational leadership in today's churches.

In verses 11-15, Paul expanded his imagery of the congregation as a building. Excellent building materials might be used (silver, gold, costly stones); shoddy materials might be used (wood, hay, straw). If the structure was exposed to fire, the difference in building materials would immediately become evident. And there is coming a fiery judgment day in which the way Christians have carried out their service will be revealed for what it truly is. Paul was careful to avoid implying that true believers can lose their salvation (3:15).

**Verse 16:** *Don't you know that you are God's sanctuary and that the Spirit of God lives in you?*

Paul continued the building imagery, focusing on a sanctuary or temple. The pronoun you is plural, referring to the congregation as a whole. The people, not the physical building — is a place where the Spirit of God lives. As God's sanctuary the people are to be united in honoring God, not the ones who erected the building.

**Verse 17:** *If anyone ruins God's sanctuary, God will ruin him; for God's sanctuary is holy, and that is what you are.*

Who is the one who ruins God's sanctuary? In the context, Paul must have in mind those responsible for divisions in the church. God's sanctuary is holy because God's Spirit dwells there. His people have been set apart for Him.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 13

### 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-21

#### THE BACKGROUND

Imagine the apostle Paul suddenly appearing among us today, talking our language and looking like a contemporary person. Would we recognize his strengths? Would we want him to serve as pastor of our church, or would we find some of his words and ways objectionable? We tend to look at Paul through the lens of Christian history and with the knowledge the Spirit inspired him to write the letters that form a large part of the New Testament.

The Corinthian Christians had no such vantage point. They knew Paul as the traveling preacher whose message about Jesus they had believed. They knew him as one who had lingered in their city to help them start their church life together. After a lengthy stay (Acts 18:11), he had continued his missionary journey. The Corinthian believers had continued to exist as a church after Paul's departure. As we learned in last week's lesson, the congregation had fractured into several cliques. Some of the church members were looking with disdain at Paul. It nearly broke his heart.

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul felt compelled to review his ministry. Through his words, we see a compelling example of what it means to be a church leader. We also see that church members are to recognize and encourage the leaders God has placed among them.

#### 1. REFUSE TO BE CRITICAL (1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5)

**Verse 1:** *A person should consider us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of God's mysteries.*

Paul's primary focus was on the vertical dimension of his life (between the Lord and himself). His relationship with the Lord motivated everything else he did. The apostle used two telling terms. The first, servants, also means "attendants" or "assistants." The Greek word translated *servants* appears only here in all Paul's Letters (see also Acts 26:16, where the same Greek term occurs in Paul's account of the Lord's appointment of him as a "servant"). The second term, managers, also means "stewards," those entrusted with a task by a superior, perhaps a house owner.

The mysteries God had entrusted to Paul were the gospel truths he faithfully proclaimed. They were God's purposes in Christ, which become known to people only by His revealing them. Paul had already written in this letter about "God's

hidden wisdom in a mystery" (1 Corinthians 2:7), spiritual insights hidden from unbelievers but revealed to believers. The term *mysteries* further underscores that the church of God is focused on matters that touch eternity.

**Verse 2:** *In this regard, it is expected of managers that each one be found faithful.*

What is the duty of managers? It is to discharge faithfully the responsibility given to them by their superior. They are accountable to do their jobs well. The verb "expected" is from a Greek word that also can be rendered "seek after" or "look for," pointing to a time of reckoning that certainly is ahead. What quality is most sought by the one who supervises a manager? It is for the manager to be faithful, that is, "reliable" or "trustworthy." Paul was committed to be the kind of person the Lord could count on. Because God already had proven faithful to Paul (1:9), he was confident God also would enable him to be faithful.

**Verse 3:** *It is of little importance that I should be evaluated by you or by a human court. In fact, I don't even evaluate myself.*

Paul was still thinking vertically. Thus he was convinced it was relatively of little importance for him to be evaluated ("judged") at the horizontal level. This accountability included several possible judges:

1. You (the Corinthians among whom he labored, some of whom were finding fault with him).
2. A human court (before which Paul had been hauled in Corinth; see Acts 18:12-16).
3. Myself (his own self-assessment).

Paul was not denying the place of either self-assessment or of hearing from others their suggestions for strengthening his ministry. Rather he was dealing with the tendency of some in the Corinthian church. They had become excessively critical of their leaders.

**Verse 4:** *For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. The One who evaluates me is the Lord.*

Contrary to pop culture, conscience is not an infallible guide for approving or condemning moral decisions. There is only one absolute standard of right and wrong: the Lord. Paul recognized the only verdict that counted was what the One who evaluates determined.

**Verse 5:** *Therefore don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts.*

*And then praise will come to each one from God.*

Only when the Lord comes will final evaluation of a leader's deeds and motives be revealed. His assessment will bring to light secret faults, for He will bring to light what is hidden. Further, His judgment will reveal Christians' true motivation for ministry. Once proper verdicts have been rendered by the Lord, God Himself will offer praise to those whose motives have been pure and whose deeds have been commendable. Paul longed for the day the Master would say to him, "Well done, good slave!" (Luke 19:17).

#### 2. RECOGNIZE THEIR SERVICE (1 CORINTHIANS 4:9-13)

**Verse 9:** *For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: we have become a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men.*

The key to understanding Paul's comparison in this verse is the term spectacle, from which our word "theater" comes. Paul imagined himself and Christ's other apostles as if they had been marched into a grand Roman arena. As a vast throng watched from the stands, those persons condemned to die would be paraded by. They would be forced to face armed gladiators or wild animals. Paul viewed the arena stands as filled with both angels and men, watching curiously to see what would happen to Christ's servants in a life-or-death struggle.

Paul's point was that his work had eternal value and that it mattered greatly whether or not he was faithful in carrying out his ministry. More was at stake than just the success of the local congregation in Corinth. Both human beings and supernatural beings were watching to see how God's churches developed and grew. The apostle's physical survival was secondary. Paul could move forward with confidence because he knew he was part of God's sovereign plan.

**Verse 10:** *We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!*

Paul contrasted the challenges he endured in ministry with the supposedly glorious success of the Corinthians, who were oh-so-superior in their own estimation. The irony is clear! Paul described himself and the other apostles as fools for Christ in contrast to the Corinthians as wise in Christ. He identified God's apostles as weak and the Corinthians as strong. He further sarcastically contrasted himself and the other apostles as dishonored to the Corinthians as distinguished!

Paul already had made his case that the gospel of God is characterized by what the world considers weak and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). In this life, therefore, it was no wonder that humble servants of the gospel were considered weak and foolish. Paul was trying to warn the Corinthians about the false pretensions they had about themselves.

**Verse 11:** *Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless;*

Paul began a litany of the awful personal experiences he had experienced as a Christian leader. He had relinquished what most of us consider basic human rights. Paul had gone hungry and thirsty. He had been poorly clothed and homeless. The apostle also had been roughly treated (for example see Acts 16:19-24).

**Verse 12:** *we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;*

Paul described himself as working with his own hands. He was a professional tentmaker (Acts 18:1-3). Paul was reviled. However, the apostle's response to those who reviled him demonstrated Christlikeness. Paul practiced what he counseled: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Romans 12:14).

The term "persecuted" implies evil actions, beyond evil words. The Book of Acts is full of examples in which Paul was mistreated. Here, he noted his reaction was not resistance or revenge, natural human responses to unfair treatment. Again, Paul practiced what he preached: "Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath" (Romans 12:19a).

**Verse 13:** *when we are slandered, we entreat. We are, even now, like the world's garbage, like the filth of all things.*

The term slandered, like "reviled," implies evil speech. Instead of trading verbal jab for verbal jab, Paul did the opposite. The word translated entreat also can be rendered "encourage."

Paul moved to the thought of being considered garbage. The hostile world considered Christ's workers like the filth of all things—of no value or good for nothing but to be thrown on a rubbish heap. A crowd in Jerusalem later would shout, "Wipe this person off the earth—it's a disgrace for him to live!" (Acts 22:22b).

The apostle was anxious for the Corinthian believers to realize how much he had endured in service for them. Surely they needed to have a better opinion of him than the world did. He did not give up in his ministry but rather

continued to labor, enduring persecution and even blessing those who spoke against him.

### 3. ACCEPT THEIR GUIDANCE (1 CORINTHIANS 4:14-20)

**Verse 14:** *I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.*

Paul's intention had not been to shame the Corinthians because of their immaturity. He wanted to warn them for their own spiritual welfare. The verb *warn* includes the idea of instructing or teaching. The key to understanding the advice Paul gave is found in his phrase *my dear children*. In that expression Paul's love for these ornery believers is clear.

**Verse 15:** *For you can have 10,000 instructors in Christ, but you can't have many fathers. Now I have fathered you in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

In wealthy, first-century society, children were committed to tutors. These tutors saw that the children received a proper education. Yet each child had only one father who brought that child into the world.

Apollos and others had helped the Corinthians grow in their faith (see 3:6). However, only one person had been the human agent whom God had used to bring the life of the gospel to them: Paul himself (3:6,10). The three parts of Paul's "paternity claim" deserve a closer look.

First is Paul's emphatic statement, "I have fathered you." Paul and no other had brought about their birth. Of course, Paul was not denying the reality that God's Spirit is the One who truly gives birth to believers (John 3:6-8).

Second is the phrase "in Christ Jesus." With these words Paul made clear the birth of the church rested in Christ. Because of Paul's ministry, the Corinthians had the opportunity to be *in Christ*, to have a personal relationship with Him.

The third phrase is "through the gospel." The means by which Paul had birthed the Corinthians was his proclamation of the good news (see 1 Corinthians 2:2).

**Verse 16:** *Therefore I urge you, be imitators of me.*

The term imitators can suggest something fake. Here, it is a positive term implying following another's example. Paul was not expressing any false pride when he wrote these words. Rather, he was an example of genuine Christian living and leadership.

**Verse 17:** *This is why I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will*

*remind you about my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church.*

Paul here mentioned Timothy, whom the Corinthians knew because of his role in the early days of their church (Acts 18:5). Just as Paul had led the Corinthians to faith in Christ, so also he had earlier led Timothy to Christ. Thus, Timothy too was Paul's beloved and faithful child in the Lord. Here Timothy had been entrusted with a charge from Paul, accountable to deliver a message to the Corinthians (see 16:10).

Timothy's responsibility was to remind the believers of what they already knew: Paul's ways as a Christian. The term *ways* also means "roads." We might use the term *lifestyle* as an equivalent. Christianity is more than just a set of beliefs. It is a way of living—as Timothy himself understood and practiced. Paul was simply holding the Corinthians to the same standard of Christian living he expected of all the congregations.

**Verse 18:** *Now some are inflated with pride, as though I were not coming to you.*

The Corinthians were acting like kids who, when their parents are away from home, think they are getting away with violating the family's standards. Some of the Corinthians were inflated with pride, thinking they were superior to their father in the faith. Such arrogance—demonstrated both by their divisiveness and by their acceptance of immorality (5:2)—had no place in the congregation's life.

**Verse 19:** *But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will know not the talk but the power of those who are inflated with pride.*

Paul hoped to come soon if the Lord permitted him to do so. He planned to find out personally how much power those who were hostile to him actually had. He hoped the Corinthians would go ahead and get their church life back in order but he was ready to set things right in person if need be.

**Verse 20:** *For the kingdom of God is not in talk but in power.*

The kingdom of God includes His present rule in believers' lives. New life in Christ shows itself in power through a life transformed by Christ's Spirit. Such a transformed individual demonstrates love for God and others through humble service. Empty talk can never substitute for the power of God's Spirit at work in an individual's life or in a congregation.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 20

### 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-6:20

#### THE BACKGROUND

Even by first-century standards, Corinth was infamous for its sexual permissiveness. The Corinthian temple of Aphrodite [af roh DIGH tih], a pagan love goddess, featured sexual rituals with “sacred” priestesses. Furthermore, Corinth was a commercial crossroads, and sailors and travelers knew where to find a good time. Many of the Corinthian believers may have come from promiscuous backgrounds. It’s no wonder some church members had difficulty following Christian teachings on sexual purity. One preacher cleverly put it this way: “It was much easier to take Christians out of Corinth than to take Corinth out of the Christians there.”

What is the Christian teaching about sexual morality? The following statement summarizes it succinctly: God’s intention is for the sexual relationship to be enjoyed only by a married husband and wife. Of course, the issue of morality is broader than the matter of sexuality, but this issue is usually the focal concern. Thus, our lesson this week will concentrate on Paul’s teaching on sexual conduct. Yet we will also see how he expressed his concern for other areas of moral behavior, such as Christians taking each other to court.

#### 1. TO HELP YOUR CHURCH (1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-6)

**Verse 1:** *Does any of you who has a complaint against someone dare go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?*

We are unaware of the exact nature of the legal wrangling going on between certain Corinthian believers. Some Bible scholars think Paul’s later reference to Christians being “cheated” (1 Corinthians 6:7) implies that property disputes were the main problem. In any case, to use today’s legal language, the complaint against someone was a civil matter rather than a criminal issue. Without doubt the saints (believers) should care more about settling things fairly — even if they weren’t trained judges — whenever legal questions arose among themselves.

**Verse 2:** *Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest cases?*

In his mind’s eye, Paul looked ahead to the final judgment of human beings by Christ. In ways that we cannot fully

understand, the saints will actively participate with Him in assessing the peoples of the world. Jesus Himself indicated something of this reality in Matthew 19:28. Certain passages that refer to the future reign of believers also imply or indicate a judgment function given to Christ’s followers (see 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4).

We as believers will one day judge the world because we have received a godly perspective on justice. This judgment is a tremendous responsibility. Therefore we should consider ourselves capable of judging the smallest cases that arise among ourselves in the present time. In contrast to this future judging of the world, the judgment of *the smallest cases* is not as significant.

**Verse 3:** *Do you not know that we will judge angels—not to speak of things pertaining to this life?*

In this case, Paul looked ahead to the time we will judge angels, presumably evil angels (see 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). The Bible reveals few details of this event, but Paul pressed his point that this is a huge responsibility. Therefore, we as believers should consider ourselves capable now of passing sentence on comparatively trivial things pertaining to this life.

**Verse 4:** *So if you have cases pertaining to this life, do you select those who have no standing in the church to judge?*

The phrase “cases pertaining to this life” refers to issues lacking eternal significance. To be sure, a third party is often helpful in sorting out such things. How ironic the Corinthians were choosing unbelievers to hear their legal complaints on matters involving fellow believers. Paul implied that such matters were capable of being handled internally.

**Verse 5:** *I say this to your shame! Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who will be able to arbitrate between his brothers?*

Surely both the reputation of Christ and the reputation of the congregation suffer when matters go public or go to court! Of course, Paul recognized the legitimate role of criminal courts, and he himself later took advantage of the Roman legal system to appeal his case directly to the emperor (Acts 25:10-12).

Paul’s practical advice to the Corinthian believers was for them to agree on one wise person among them who could help settle disputes. Paul may have written this phrase a bit tongue in cheek for the Corinthians obviously prided themselves on being wise (1 Corinthians 4:10). Whether Paul was thinking of a permanent appointment of someone as an

official church arbitrator or whether he was proposing a case-by-case negotiator is unknown. The point is that Christians with disagreements will cast a positive reflection on their church if they work together at resolving their differences without taking each other to court.

**Verse 6:** *Instead, brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!*

In biological families, it is a sure sign of dysfunctional relationships when brother goes to law against brother. In God’s family, such lawsuits are even more a sign of failure. The unbelievers who hear the case and render judgment really won’t have the church family’s interest and reputation at heart.

#### 2. TO SHOW YOUR SALVATION (1 CORINTHIANS 6:7-9A,11)

**Verse 7:** *Therefore, it is already a total defeat for you that you have lawsuits against one another. Why not rather put up with injustice? Why not rather be cheated?*

It is safe to conclude that the civil lawsuits against one another among the Corinthian Christians were based on greed, retaliation, or some other self-centered motivation. Yet following Christ calls for the opposite approach—loving others sacrificially and exercising self-control. Thus the simple fact that such civil cases even existed was admission of a total defeat of the principles Christ has called for among His followers. Paul begged the Corinthians to put up with injustice, willingly giving up their rights to receive what they deserved from other believers. A willingness to be cheated shows that someone understands a bigger picture exists than this life only. Such a willingness to forfeit one’s rights also shows that a Christian recognizes the importance of the church’s witness in the world.

**Verse 8:** *Instead, you act unjustly and cheat—and this to brothers!*

Paul sided against those who had taken their Christian brothers to court. The verb translated act unjustly is a general term that also can be rendered “do wrong.” The verb translated cheat can refer to the idea of defrauding or swindling another. Yet Paul was arguing that genuine believers ought to bear up under injustice rather than bring disgrace on the reputation of the Christian church by publicly exposing their family squabbles in the court system.

**Verse 9a:** *Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit God’s kingdom?*

Ultimately, there are only two kinds of people. First are the unjust (“evil” or “sinful”). All of us are sinful. Left alone, no person will naturally act with righteousness. No person is fit to inherit God’s kingdom without the transforming experience of being born again. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus about the need for a new birth relates directly to Paul’s point (see John 3:3-8).

The other kind of person is the kind whom God has declared righteous through faith in Christ. These individuals have turned to Christ and with God’s help are serving Him (1 Thessalonians 1:9). With the help of God’s Spirit, they are developing more righteousness in their daily behavior. Thus, the apostle was implying that those Corinthians taking each other to court weren’t acting like members of God’s family are supposed to act.

**Verse 11:** *Some of you were like this; 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.*

Some of the Corinthians had been converted to Christ from openly unrighteous lifestyles. Paul knew some of them were like this because he had been the human instrument God had used to preach them the gospel (see Acts 18). The verb *were* means that they had left their old life behind. Their new behavior was evidence they had been saved.

Paul selected three descriptions of what the Spirit of our God had worked in the Corinthian believers’ lives. The apostle’s emphasis was on the wonderful work God had done in the Corinthian Christians.

The phrase “you were washed” points to inner cleansing from the defilement of sin. The reference may be to baptism, which is an outward symbol of the inner cleansing from sin. Readers of the letter from a Jewish background also surely thought of the cleansing ceremonies described in the Old Testament.

The expression “you were sanctified” points to salvation as being set apart for God. Paul used a verb form closely related to the noun “saints.” The term “saint” was one of the apostle’s favorite designations for believers in Christ (see 1 Corinthians 1:2). The statement “you were justified” is courtroom or legal language. It calls to mind a judge’s declaration of acquittal: “Not guilty!”

Paul’s use of the phrase “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” possibly refers to the occasion of water baptism, when the converted person was immersed in Christ’s name (see Acts 10:48). By this symbolic action the

believer publicly declared the changes that had already occurred in his or her life.

### 3. TO MAINTAIN YOUR GODLINESS (1 CORINTHIANS 6:13B-17)

**Verse 13b:** *The body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*

When God created humanity, He declared His creation “very good” (Gen. 1:26-31). This declaration included the physical, bodily aspect of humanity as well as the spiritual aspect. God designed us so that we can take pleasure in both food and sexual relationships. Both appetites can be abused and misused. Yet these appetites are profoundly enjoyable when the Lord’s principles are followed. The Lord has said that sexual activity belongs only in the marriage relationship (Hebrews 13:4). In other words, He is for the body not against it.

**Verse 14:** *God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power.*

Paul inserted an unexpected reference to the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. His point was that God has such a high regard for human bodies that they will be resurrected. God’s raising of the body of Christ is the pattern for our being raised up by His power. Thus the physical bodies of believers, destined for resurrection splendor in eternity, are not to be used for immorality in this life.

**Verse 15:** *Do you not know that your bodies are the members of Christ? So should I take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Absolutely not!*

The believer’s resurrection body in the future is an important reason to be moral sexually, but the believer’s union with Christ in the present is another motivation to maintain sexual purity. Later in the letter Paul expanded his teaching that our bodies are the members of Christ. There he compared the term *members* with physical parts of the human body, such as hands and eyes (1 Corinthians 12:12-31; see 12:27 especially).

Some of the Corinthians had been thinking that joining their physical bodies to a prostitute did not affect their relationship with the Lord. The phrase “Absolutely not!” was a strong way of rejecting such an assertion as completely outrageous.

**Verse 16:** *Do you not know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For it says, The two will become one flesh.*

Paul’s quotation of Genesis 2:24 means there is no such

thing as casual sexual relations. Whenever sexual union occurs, a one-flesh relationship has developed. This fact is true when the union is within marriage (as in the original setting of Gen. 2:24). This fact is also the case when a person is joined to a prostitute or joined to anyone else.

**Verse 17:** *But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.*

Paul called the Corinthians to recognize that bond in their lives that takes priority over any other bond. As Christians, they were joined to the Lord. This union was, of course, not a physical union but a union in which a believer is one spirit with Him (see Ephesians 5:21-33). Thus, sexual immorality violates a believer’s spiritual relationship with the Lord.

### 4. TO SAFEGUARD YOUR WELL-BEING (1 CORINTHIANS 6:18-20)

**Verse 18:** *Flee from sexual immorality! “Every sin a person can commit is outside the body,” but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body.*

Tragically, many persons are drawn into sexual compromise because they did not plan ahead to steer clear of places and situations in which temptations are likely to arise.

Some of the Corinthians were evidently downplaying the havoc that sexual sin wreaks by citing the slogan, “Every sin a person can commit is outside the body.” Paul vigorously corrected this nonsense. It’s obvious that sexual immorality involves the body. Therefore, immoral persons have sinned not only against the Lord and against other people; they also have sinned against their own body.

**Verses 19-20:** *Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*

The very physical body of individual Christians exists as a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. His indwelling presence means our bodies are to be used for His holy purposes, not for sinful, selfish purposes. The Spirit is God’s gift to believers, and to be immoral is to spurn this precious gift.

Second, believers have been purchased through Christ’s death. He redeemed us from slavery to sin. He is our new Master. Therefore, we do not have the right to do with our bodies what we please. The new Master wants us to please Him not only in our thoughts and attitudes but also with our bodies.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JUNE 27

### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

#### THE BACKGROUND

Our first three lessons have emphasized Paul's response to various troubles in the Corinthian church that had been reported to him. These problems centered on divisions in the congregation and disgraceful behavior. Paul dealt with wrong ideas that were threatening the believers by asking them to promote church unity (June 6 lesson); by suggesting ways to encourage their leaders (June 13 lesson); and by presenting reasons for practicing Christian morality (June 20 lesson).

Paul opened 1 Corinthians 7:1 with these words: "About the things you wrote." With this phrase, he marked a key transition in the letter. The apostle was turning to a list of questions the congregation had sent to him. For the rest of the epistle, he navigated through the list by using the special term "about."

The first question from the list that Paul focused on concerned marriage and staying single. Evidently popular opinions about marriage in ancient Corinth were as diverse as they are in our society. The church had raised questions about the right way to think about this vital issue. Paul's answers were specific to the needs of the Corinthians, and therefore this chapter is only a beginning point for discussing marriage. It does not offer a complete statement about marriage, divorce, or staying single.

As we look into the Lesson Passages, we will observe that Paul had a high view of marriage. He believed marriage and sex are good gifts of God. They are part of His plan for humanity. At the same time, Paul affirmed the Old Testament teaching that sexual intimacy is to be reserved for marriage—and therefore those who choose to stay single are to be celibate.

#### 1. WHERE TO BEGIN (1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-11)

**Verse 10:** *I command the married—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave her husband.*

Paul strongly stated the biblical ideal. He considered his teaching a command that originated with the Lord Jesus. Mark recorded Jesus' instruction about divorce in Mark 10:1-12. Jesus upheld the highest standard. Marriage is meant to last as long as both husband and wife shall live.

When Paul wrote that a wife is not to leave her

husband, we can be confident he was thinking about divorce. Notice that Paul did not imply that a believer who divorces is a second-class person or a second-class Christian. Furthermore, even divorce for less than biblical reasons is not unpardonable.

**Verse 11:** *But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—and a husband is not to leave his wife.*

Paul next stated the reciprocal teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:10: a husband is not to leave his wife. In a fallen world, however, divorce occurs, and Paul acknowledged this fact in the phrase if she does leave. What should be done in such a scenario? The best case is that the two be reconciled. If the wife is not reconciled to her husband, she is to remain unmarried. Paul's point was that believers who are married are to do all they can to stay married, and those who are contemplating divorce are to do all they can to restore their relationship. No doubt many troubled Christian marriages could be saved if both husband and wife committed themselves to understanding and applying the teaching of this verse.

Verses 12-16 are to be interpreted in light of verses 10-11 and the biblical ideal of no divorce. Here Paul concentrated on only one situation in which divorce can be permissible—when one spouse is a believer and the other is an unbeliever who wants to divorce. The apostle did not here address other situations in which divorce might be permissible. Of course, the assumption in the scenario Paul addressed is that one spouse became a believer after the two were married and not that a Christian married an unbeliever. As we will see, in the situation Paul was addressing, the best answer to the question of when to stay married—in the case of a "mixed" marriage (a believer with an unbeliever)—is, "Always!"

#### 2. SHOULD WE FLIRT TO CONVERT?

##### (1 CORINTHIANS 7:12-16)

**Verse 12:** *But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is willing to live with him, he must not leave her.*

The term the rest refers to couples in a mixed marriage. When Paul wrote the phrase, "I, not the Lord, say", he meant that to his knowledge in His earthly teachings, the Lord Jesus had taught nothing on the topic of believers who found themselves in mixed marriages. Paul was

certainly not denying his teaching authority as an apostle. Neither was he implying that his writings were secondary or not inspired by the Spirit.

The situation Paul envisioned was that of a married couple in which the husband had become a Christian, but his wife remained an unbeliever. Such a situation was no warrant for the husband to seek a divorce. If the wife was willing to live with him, then the Christian husband should do everything possible to make his marriage succeed.

**Verse 13:** *Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband, and he is willing to live with her, she must not leave her husband.*

As we observed earlier, verse 11 presents the reciprocal of verse 10. In verse 13 Paul stated the flip side of verse 12. In this case, the wife had become a Christian after the two were married, but her husband had not come to faith in Christ. This situation was no reason for the Christian wife to leave, that is, divorce. The key was whether her husband was willing to live with her. In both sets of verses (7:10-11 dealing with Christian marriage and 7:12-13 dealing with mixed marriage) Paul implied that both spouses had equal responsibilities to work on the success of their marriage. It is commonly acknowledged that males had many more legal privileges than women did in the first century. Nevertheless, Paul understood that both the husband and the wife were responsible for the success of their marriage—legally and otherwise.

**Verse 14:** *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the Christian husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.*

The term sanctified generally means set apart for God's purposes. Paul was not teaching that an unbelieving spouse was automatically redeemed. Such a concept would have been foreign to one who emphasized the role of personal faith in matters of salvation. Rather Paul meant that by the Christian wife or by the Christian husband, the influence of the gospel would be felt in the home. Here's how Richard L. Pratt, Jr. commented on this concept: "The sanctification process is different in each marriage. Some unbelieving spouses will eventually become believers through their association with their believing spouses (7:16). Others will not respond to this influence. In the very least, these unbelievers come into contact with the gospel and Christian graces in ways that ordinary people never experience."

Another important factor for the apostle was the children who were born and raised as the result of mixed marriages. The believing parent could rest assured that the children were not unclean, that is, outside godly influence. Rather they were holy or set apart. Such children were not automatically saved, but they were certainly influenced for good by the presence of a believing parent.

**Verse 15:** *But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to peace.*

Paul was a realist. Although the potential for Christian influence in mixed marriages is great, in some cases the unbelieving spouse will want out. Paul believed that the initiative for divorce was to rest with the unbelieving spouse. If the unbelieving spouse wanted a divorce, the believing spouse should let him or her leave. In such circumstances, the Christian spouse must not feel bound, that is, obligated to hold the marriage together. The statement that God has called you to peace means that if the unbelieving spouse felt trapped in a marriage to a believer, the home would likely be in a constant uproar. God means for families to live in peace. In some cases divorce may be the only resolution to the conflict.

**Verse 16:** *For you, wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Or you, husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?*

No one knows his or her personal future. God only knows what kind of positive influence we may have in the lives of others. Thus Paul pushed for Christians married to non-Christians to remember they might eventually lead their spouses to Christ. What a joyful celebration for a wife to know she had a direct role in helping save her husband from eternal death! What a tremendous thing for a husband to be the human agent God used to save his wife! This verse depicts witnessing at the most fundamental level. Such witnessing would necessarily be through both life and speech.

### 3. THE SINGLE LIFE (1 CORINTHIANS 7:32-35)

Verses 32-35 present Paul's case for unmarried people choosing to stay single. He cited several advantages single Christians with the gift of celibacy have over married believers. However, he clearly did not teach that only single Christians can serve God faithfully. Furthermore, the context of these verses shows that Paul was expressing

his preference, rather than giving a command.

**Verse 32:** *I want you to be without concerns. An unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord.*

What did Paul want for unmarried Christians? The phrase without concerns translates a single adjective that means “free from worrying” or “not anxious.” Paul knew that marriage typically brings a multitude of cares. An unmarried man can focus more freely on how he may please the Lord than can someone who is married. To be concerned about the things of the Lord is to be able to keep ministry opportunities in focus without the disruption of family needs. A moment's reflection shows that an unmarried man may willingly become a hero to the point of sacrificing his life. That same man might shirk from a similarly valiant action at the thought of making his wife a widow or his children orphans. Although husbands and daddies (and wives and mothers) are as capable of self-sacrifice as unmarried persons, the point still stands.

**Verses 33-34a:** *But a married man is concerned about the things of the world—how he may please his wife—and he is divided.*

Paul was not de-emphasizing the importance of a married man going to great effort to please his wife in every way. Yet such effort may largely concern matters that involve the things of the world, that is, things that won't matter in the light of eternity—things such as fixing a leaky pipe or arranging a nice dinner out away from the kids. Such things may be essential, but they are obviously temporal. At the same time, Paul would surely have recognized the eternal value of a husband caring for his wife, including investing in his wife's spiritual welfare by praying and studying God's Word with her.

The apostle's bottom-line belief was that a Christian married man is divided in his interests. He wants to please the Lord. He wants to please his wife. Therefore, he cannot concentrate as completely on the Lord's interests as a single person can.

**Verse 34b:** *An unmarried woman or a virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.*

Paul moved his attention from single males to single females. Like single men, such Christian women are free to be concerned about the things of the Lord. Paul made the

further comment—which would equally be true for single men—that single women can concentrate more completely on what it means to be holy both in body and in spirit. By *holy . . . in body* Paul meant sexual purity—and for singles, this means total abstinence. No doubt it was challenging for unmarried Christian adults in a city like Corinth to be celibate. Only by intentionally committing to God's standards can a person do so.

On the other hand, when a single woman becomes a wife she inevitably becomes concerned about the things of the world, things that don't matter from an eternal perspective. Such things might include shopping, balancing the checkbook, and meal preparation—things that may be essential, but they are temporal. A wife will want to please her husband in these and other things.

**Verse 35:** *Now I am saying this for your own benefit, not to put a restraint on you, but because of what is proper, and so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction.*

Perhaps Paul could hear some Corinthians responding to his advice that unmarried persons should consider staying single by saying, “Get real!” He therefore assured them one more time that his opinion was for their own benefit. If someone was inclined to think of Paul's counsel as a straitjacket—a restraint—then marriage was an honorable option, as verses 36-40 reveal. The *benefit* of singleness is threefold:

1. It is proper. The Greek term means “respected” or “good order.”
2. Singleness better enables a Christian to be devoted to the Lord. This teaching had been Paul's primary point all along.
3. A life without distraction by temporal things is better for those who are called to singleness.

### 4. TO MARRY OR NOT TO MARRY (1 CORINTHIANS 7:36-39)

**Verse 36:** *But if any man thinks he is acting improperly toward his virgin, if she is past marriageable age, and so it must be, he can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married.*

Verses 36-40 present Paul's advice for unmarried people choosing to marry. Although he thought being single was preferable, Paul indicated that engaged couples do not sin in getting married. Further, he approved remarriage for widows.

Bible students have puzzled over the precise relationship of a man and his virgin. Who precisely were these virgins? One possibility is that certain Christian fathers were not permitting their daughters to marry. Much more likely is the view that certain engaged men in the Corinthian church were delaying marriage to their fiancées. Possibly this delay was related to the “present distress” of the church (7:26).

Delaying marriage indefinitely could cause tension for the woman. Especially if she wanted children, it would not be fair to her to wait until she was past marriageable age. Thus, the man in this case may justifiably conclude that for him to delay longer would be acting improperly toward his fiancée. If so, the man could do what he wants. Engaged couples have the freedom to get married. Even though Paul thought staying single was preferable, a person is not sinning in getting married.

**Verse 37:** *But he who stands firm in his heart (who is under no compulsion, but has control over his own will) and has decided in his heart to keep his own virgin, will do well.*

A few engaged couples might decide to delay marriage indefinitely—or call off the engagement entirely—for spiritual reasons. Paul recognized this decision would be exceptional, found in one who stands firm in his heart, that is, who has control over his own will. If such a person felt no compulsion to marry, then he or she would do well. Lottie Moon, missionary to China, made the choice to reject a marriage proposal because God had first claim on her life.

**Verse 38:** *So then he who marries his virgin does well, but he who does not marry will do better.*

Verses 36-38 strongly affirm celibacy before marriage. In verse 38 Paul returned to the thought of verse 36. In verse 38 he stated it positively: he who marries . . . does well. Marriage is a good institution, designed by God. Paul balanced this remark with his own opinion: he who does not marry will do better. These words remind us of what he had written in verses 32-35.

**Verse 39:** *A wife is bound as long as her husband is living. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord.*

The person who marries should never do so lightly, thinking that if things get difficult, the marriage can easily be dissolved. Paul reminded his readers of the seriousness of marriage. Once married, the wife is bound as long as her husband is living. Equally, of course, the

husband is bound to the marriage as long as his wife is alive. Although God works redemptively with sinful human beings, He designed death, not divorce, to be the appropriate release from the marriage covenant.

Christian widows are free to be married. There was no obligation to stay single out of respect for the deceased husband. The only limit was that the second marriage be to a Christian (“only in the Lord”). Yet Paul concluded by counseling that such a widowed person consider staying single (7:40), just as he had earlier advised never-married persons (7:38).

Verses 36-40 show Paul’s personal preference for staying single. At the same time, he taught that those who marry “do well.” He also approved of remarriage for widows. For Christians today, one application of Paul’s teaching is as follows: if we are single and do not have the gift of celibacy, we are free to get married.