

A 1 CORINTHIANS SERIES: FOOL'S GOLD

LIFE GROUP
BIBLE STUDIES

1 CORINTHIANS 1-4



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INTRODUCTION

1 CORINTHIANS

1-4



The apostle Paul faced a double problem in writing to the Corinthians. On the one hand he was the person who founded the church in Corinth and was therefore anxious not to discourage the believers there from their enthusiasm for the Christian faith. On the other hand, he had been receiving alarming reports of unacceptable conduct amongst many of them, and recognised the need to write to them to admonish them and to correct their behaviour.

In one letter (which is missing – see 1 Cor 5:9) he directed them not to associate with the immoral citizens of Corinth. Shortly after that, probably in A.D. 55, he received a communication from ‘Chloe’s household’ (1 Cor 1:11) informing him of the growth of a divisive party spirit in the Corinthian church, and so he rebuked them for this behaviour in a second letter (which is, in fact 1 Corinthians), and notifying them that he was sending Timothy to remind them of how they should live. This is the substance of what we are looking at in this mini-series on the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians.

However, before Paul sent the letter, he received some oral reports about sexual laxity and various disputes amongst the Corinthians, so he added some further instructions (1 Cor 5-6), followed by an extended response to yet further communication from Corinth seeking his ruling and advice on a variety of questions, including marriage and divorce, food sacrificed to idols and spiritual gifts in the church (1 Cor 7-15).

This, very briefly, is the context for the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians in our sermon and Life Group series. There is the familiar introductory greeting and thanksgiving (1:1-9), after which Paul addresses the divisive quarrelling in the church reported by Chloe’s household.

The Life Group studies open with a brief summary of Paul’s response in each of the four sections covered in this series, followed by some questions which those in Life Groups may wish to use as a framework for exploring Paul’s teaching further, applying it to their own lives.



There are two main parts to this opening passage from chapter 1. Verses 1-9 contain Paul's greeting to the church in Corinth, followed – as is typical in his letters to various other churches – by thanksgiving to God for them. He then launches immediately in verses 10-17 into an appeal to them for unity as a result of what he has heard from some people in Chloe's household in Corinth.

- Notice how he addresses the Corinthians in verses 4-9, in spite of all that he has heard about them. What strikes you about his words to them?
- What do they tell you about how we should respond to those whom we know and love – especially those close to us – whose lives are out of line?
- What does Paul's thanksgiving teach us about the grace given to us in Christ Jesus (verse 4)?

In verses 10-17 Paul goes to the heart of the problem he has just heard about amongst the Corinthians – division has split the community of faith as a result of groups of people following different leaders amongst them. In particular, Paul deplores being included in this partisanship.

- Why do you think local church fellowships are vulnerable to splits caused by the cult of personality like the one at Corinth?
- What do verses 13-17 teach us as Christians at Coro about how we can contribute to unity and encourage peace amongst ourselves?
- What is 'the power of the cross' to which Paul refers in verse 17 as it applies to the situation at Corinth?



This passage straddles two chapters, the end of chapter 1 and the whole of chapter 2. We can detect two major themes: foolishness and wisdom. Paul turns the usual understanding of foolishness on its head as he contrasts human and divine wisdom, the wisdom of the age versus the folly of the gospel. Human wisdom reckons the gospel as folly, but it is, writes Paul, the wisdom of God.

- What do you understand by Paul's words in verse 25: "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom"? Does this mean that we always have to dispense with the wisdom that the world offers?
- What do you think Paul means when he describes the preaching of Christ crucified as "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles"? (*Note: Paul uses the terms Gentiles and Greeks interchangeably as counterpart to Jews*).
- "Think of what you were when you were called" (verse 26) – as you reflect on verses 27-29, what have you personally learned about the way God has worked in your life?

After an opening testimony to his own reliance upon the Spirit's power (and not human wisdom) in 2:1-5, Paul expands on the wisdom that comes from the Spirit in the rest of chapter 2. He describes it as hidden or secret wisdom, now revealed to all believers as the Spirit opens up to them "what God has prepared for those who love him" (verse 9).

- Why do you think Paul describes God's wisdom as 'secret' or 'hidden'?
- In what ways have you experienced God's Spirit revealing 'spiritual truths' in your own life?
- In v14, Paul writes about spiritual discernment (one of the gifts of the Spirit in the first half of chapter 12). How do *you* discern what is of the Spirit and what comes from 'human wisdom'?



In chapter 3 Paul again rebukes the Corinthian Christians for their divisive behaviour – as such, they are “worldly – mere infants in Christ” (verse 1). He admonishes them for their jealousy and quarrelling, recalling their inexcusable partisanship. In contrast, he says that the ones they are exalting are servants through whom God has worked to build his church – here Paul uses the metaphors of a field and a building, especially a temple. The chapter closes with a warning not to be deceived – “no more boasting about men!” (verse 21).

- What do you think Paul means when he writes in verse 2 that the Corinthians had to be fed on milk, and not solid food?
- What does verse 6 teach you about the role each of us has in the church? You might like to consider here Paul’s teaching about the body in the second half of chapter 12.
- Paul’s teaching about the foundations we are laying in our lives (verses 11-15) is very challenging. What is God saying to you in these verses?
- What do you think is the significance in Paul’s description of the Corinthians as ‘God’s temple’ (verse 16)?
- In what ways do you recognise the presence of God as Trinity in this chapter? Why is this important in our life together as the church in Coro?



Paul now turns his attention to the apostles and their converts, in contrast to the Corinthians' decline into following competing party leaders. Paul refers to himself and Apollos (one of the key leaders in Corinth), and develops his case autobiographically as he describes all the suffering that the apostles have endured for their sake. He closes the chapter by warning them of his impending visit to them: what will he find?

- Paul declares in verses 3-4 that what is important to him is not how others judge him, but how God judges him. Can you say that about yourself?
- Paul draws from his own life to teach the Corinthians about how to live, encouraging them to imitate him (verses 6 and 16). What does this say to us about the witness of our own lives?
- Paul's litany of suffering in verses 9-13 is echoed in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10. In what ways has suffering for the sake of the gospel shaped our own life? Should we expect that to happen personally?
- What is your response to Paul's description of the apostles (including himself) as "the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world", especially in the context of some Christian teaching today that emphasises prosperity?
- Paul closes by anticipating what he will find when he reaches Corinth – what does this say to us about our own lives if we had some expectation of Christ returning soon?