

## *The Power and Wisdom of God*

I Corinthians 1:1-31

February 16, 2025

Imagine living in a place where people are deeply divided over politics, religion, and most everything else. Imagine a place where people are fairly wealthy and there's lots of businesses and banks, but also a ton of sexual immorality. Prostitution, pornography, even homosexuality and incest. Imagine living among people who think money or gold or sports will make them happy. A place where even churches are deeply divided causing hurt and hindering the gospel. A place where even many churches have abandoned true teachings. A place where lawsuits flourish and injustice is rampant. And there are people from many different countries. Oh, you don't have to imagine, do you? Here we are. If you can relate to any of this, you can relate to the Christians Paul wrote to in today's Scripture, and we can benefit from his advice.

Please open your Bibles to I Corinthians. We're going to begin a new sermon series today on this book which holds many gems for those willing to mine them. I pray that you will join me in the mine over the coming weeks. Today we'll dig in to Chapter 1, but covering the entire first chapter in 30 minutes is like eating 3 gallons of ice cream at one sitting. Nevertheless, grab your spoon or your pick ax as we read 1 Cor 1:1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.

Paul identifies himself right off the bat which was customary in those days. Whenever you get a letter, what's the first thing you look at? Who it's from. Paul calls himself an apostle, one sent to spread the Gospel, to plant and encourage churches. By mentioning his position as an apostle, Paul was asserting his authority that he will use to address several problems in that church. Say authority. Authority is a dirty word today. We don't want anyone telling us what to do, we are our own authority. Authority can certainly be abused, but authority is God's order and God's way and when we rebel against His authority, we rebel against God. Paul is an apostle addressing a messed up church. Old Brethren preacher INH Beahm calls this book a straight letter to a crooked church. Paul's letters to Corinth are so very appropriate for the American church today. Apparently Sosthenes was with Paul and is perhaps his secretary writing this letter. He is probably the synagogue leader who was publicly beaten while Paul was in Corinth in Acts 18. He may now be living in Ephesus where Paul is sending this letter from. I'd move too.

Ok. That's who this letter is from. Who's it to? Paul's salutation is a little longer than when we say "Dear Nancy, To Whom It May Concern," or if it's a text, "Hey you..." Vs 2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours." So it's written to the church. Say church. The

Greek word here, ecclesia, does not mean a building, but a group or assembly, and it's the group or assembly that belongs to God in the city of Corinth. Paul had established this church a few years earlier, about AD 51, during his 2nd missionary journey and he's now writing back to her about 3 years later, AD 54/55. Most scholars believe I Corinthians is actually Paul's second letter because he refers to another one he wrote. That first letter apparently got lost in the mail ☺. No. The church in Corinth received it but it was later lost. Can't blame that one on the Post Office. But notice it's also addressed to those **everywhere** who call on Jesus Christ. So if you call on Jesus, this letter is to you. Let's pay attention.

Say Corinth. Corinth was the regional Roman capital for the area that is now Greece. Think Richmond, Va. It had as many as 750,000 people, about the size of Las Vegas. Yes. It was big. That's because of location, location, location. Corinth was up on a plateau overlooking a narrow strip of land connecting the Aegean Sea on the East with the Ionian Sea on the West. Instead of making a 250 mile voyage around the end of the peninsula, they would just drag ships roughly 4 miles over land on skids saving time and possible shipwreck. s Emperor Nero started building a Corinthian Canal in AD67 that was not finished until over 1800 years later in the late 1800s. Obviously a government project before DOGE.

Because of its location, most all east/west ship traffic went through Corinth and all north/south travelers did as well. Maybe like Elizabeth City on the way to the Outer Banks. In addition, every other year, Corinth hosted the Isthmus games, similar to our Olympics with the winners awarded a sprig of celery. Michael Phelps would have the whole produce aisle. All this meant that Corinth was very multi-cultural with a mix of peoples, cultures and religions from all over the world. It was, like the USA. Although it had Roman gods, it also had temples for Greek and Egyptian gods, as well as a Jewish synagogue. It had more than a dozen pagan temples, but the most popular was for Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sex. Imagine that. She had 1000 temple prostitutes who all the businessmen, sailors, and soldiers patronized as they passed through Corinth.

Corinth was a messed up city. Corinth then was like modern day Las Vegas only perhaps worse if it's possible. It had the reputation as one of the most beautiful cities, but also one of the most wicked. Corinth became a common byword for sexual immorality and prostitutes throughout the Roman Empire became known as Corinthian girls. Although it was very wealthy and known for its commerce and banking, like the US today, it was very wicked, like the US today. To live like a Corinthian meant living in gross immorality, drunkenness, and moral depravity. If it felt good, they did it. And some if it was creeping into the church. We live in a very similar culture dominated by sex and porn, flush with cash and sport, at the crossroads of the world. Like the Christians in Corinth we too are under constant pressure to conform to the world around us. To adopt its standards as our own in order to fit in, be successful, and thrive. Let's dig deeper into the mine to see what Paul says to them and to us.

Vs 3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way — in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Paul immediately focuses on God and on His Son, Jesus Christ whom He mentions no less than 10 times in these first 10 verses. He is grateful not only for the Corinthian Christians but for the grace Jesus gave them. He also refers to the revealing of Jesus in vs 7. What's he talking about? His return! When He will collect His saints from Corinth then or from Woodstock now! And until then, Paul assures these believers, and us, that God will keep them strong to the end. Vs 8 would be a great verse to memorize to recall when you're struggling in our Corinthian culture today. And add vs 9 for the God who called us into this relationship, this fellowship with Jesus, is faithful. Say faithful. He's not going to back out on you. Great is His faithfulness! Friends will fail us, family will let us down. Even the church will disappoint us. God will not! We may not always understand His ways or His timing, but don't ever doubt His faithfulness. He is faithful even in these times and places.

Now that Paul's salutation is over, let's get to the body of his letter. Vs 10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be **perfectly united** in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 14 I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized into **my** name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Say divided. In this letter Paul will address many issues he's heard about but the very first thing he speaks to is division. The Greek word is schismata from which our word schism comes, and it means a crack or a tear. Their once close group was **ripped** apart over their favorites. They no longer felt the warm closeness they knew when Paul planted the church there a couple years ago. They were torn. It hurt like a broken ankle or a dislocated shoulder. "I like John MacArthur, I like Chuck Swindoll, I

like David Jeremiah.” “No!” Paul says. Christ is not divided! Is it OK to have our preferences? Absolutely! As long as the teaching is Biblical and solid, have at it! But it’s not Biblical to divide over. We are to unite in Jesus, not divide over His leaders. Paul’s prayer, no, his appeal, his command as an **apostle** is that all of them agree with one another so that there may be **no** divisions among them and that they may be **perfectly united** in mind and thought.

Say perfectly united. The Greek carries the idea of putting something back together so it is no longer broken or torn. It was used to describe the mending of ripped nets, torn garments, broken bones, and dislocated joints. And this is God’s will. What is our theme this year? Complete unity! The devil doesn’t care what he divides Christians over. It can be anything. It can be the color of the carpet, the size of the offering plates, the style of music, or the personality of the preacher. Anything will do. These are not doctrinal issues! They are personal preferences. Today, he might write, “I like old hymns, I like southern gospel, I like contemporary.” There are times when we each defer to one another in love that each might have their preference, but for Christ’s sake, literally for Jesus’ sake, Paul says, don’t tear yourselves apart over stuff that doesn’t matter.

Doctrinal issues? Yes. Paul will get to some of those those. But right off the bat he’s dealing with non-doctrinal preferences. It seems that Apollo was a very gifted preacher. Perhaps a better speaker than Paul. Paul wasn’t threatened by him, he was thankful for him! Later in this letter, Paul will write (3:5) What, 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. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” Praise God for Apolloses and praise God for the Pauls, amen? For the Mercy Mes, for the Promised Land Quartets, and for the George Beverly Sheas. For all who proclaim the true gospel!

Vs 18 For 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.” Say cross. It doesn’t take Paul long to get to the cross of Jesus. He’s already mentioned His Lordship and His Messiahship and now he zeros in on the heart of Christianity. The cross of Christ. Vs 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. Why? Because the Gentile world then and now sees martyrdom as stupidity. The waste of a perfectly good life. Why would anyone follow a god who couldn’t even save himself? A true god would never allow himself to be treated as Jesus was. This was foolish to the Gentiles. The Greek word for foolish is moria (mo-ree'-ah) meaning silly or absurd. We get our word moron from it. That’s what many Greeks thought of Christians then and many think of us today. And to the Jews, the cross was a stumbling block. They rejected Jesus too. To them, to be hung on a tree was a curse from God. They were expecting a great warrior king who would deliver them, not a crucified criminal.

Vs 24, “but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Paul says Jesus is the fullness of God’s power! He is the fullness of God’s wisdom! For in Jesus dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Paul takes this petty argument about personalities way over their heads straight to the top. When we focus on Jesus, it’s amazing how earthly divisions dissolve and disappear. Focus on Jesus! Look to Jesus! As we said in one of our earlier messages, the closer we individually get to Jesus, the closer we’ll get to each other. The more unified we’ll become. Paul’s prescription to heal this torn Corinthian church was to raise their eyes and focus on Jesus. Good advice then and now to address whatever issues threaten Christian unity from time to time.

Vs 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.” Not that God is foolish in any way, but Paul’s saying what we may see as God’s foolish ways far surpass even the best of man’s wisdom. God is never weak, but any perceived weakness we think He may have is infinitely stronger than the strongest person.

Vs 26 Brothers, 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. 27 But 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 He 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.” God’s ways are higher than our ways. He doesn’t do things the way we would do them.

We would never attack a city by marching around it for a week, but look at Jericho. We’d never defeat an army with only trumpets and torches, but look at Gideon. We’d never bring a sling to giant fight, but look at David. We’d never pick a mumbling murderer to deliver slaves, but look at Moses. We’d never choose uneducated fisherman over smart philosophers, but Jesus did. God doesn’t just think outside the box, He thinks outside the universe. He chooses and uses the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, the lowly and despised to overcome the mighty. He uses the weak and foolish to accomplish His will. There’s hope for me and you. He can even use us.

Most importantly, we’d never use a poor boy of seemingly illegitimate birth, born in a smelly manger, who died on a cursed cross to save all humanity. But look at Jesus. God chose the stone the builders rejected to become His capstone.

So in the midst of the filthy unholy city in which these Corinthian Christians lived, and in the midst of the unholy sin that had flooded into their church causing divisions and worse, Paul gives the remedy, the solution, the cure. Jesus Christ and Him

crucified. He's good in Corinth, He's good in Vegas, and He's good here. His crucifixion is able to cleanse all our unrighteousness, heal all our brokenness, and restore our peace and bring **perfect unity** along with joy and holiness. Oh my dear friends, in the midst of the unholy filthy culture in which we live and in the midst of the unholiness that has crept into our own hearts, in the midst of the brokenness in our own lives and families, let's realize our only cure is the power of God and the wisdom of God, which is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Let's invite Him to do that now as we pray.