

Acts 1: Lesson Seven, Corinthians, Part 1

1 Corinthians 1 – 7

Subject: Paul exhorted the Corinthians regarding divisions within the church, immorality, lawsuits, and marriage.

Main Idea: Maturing believers apply the message of the cross to their daily lives.

Principles:

1. *The simple but maturing message of the cross humbles us.*
2. *The simple but maturing message of the cross calls for the crucifixion of selfish passions.*
3. *The simple but maturing message of the cross results in contentment.*

Introduction

When I was about 30 years old, I viewed myself as fairly spiritually mature. I had benefited from a wonderful Christian upbringing, a Christian education, and opportunities to be exposed to many mature believers. One day, as I was working on my Bible study lesson, a very simple question greatly convicted me: how had I recently demonstrated love for my neighbor (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 5:43, 19:19, 22:38-39)? I thought about the physical neighborhood in which I lived. I supposed I was kind to my neighbors, but had I gone out of my way to be sacrificial? Did I truly love them? The recognition that I had overlooked such a basic principle of scripture greatly humbled me. I had misjudged myself as more mature than I really was.

The Corinthian church had a similar problem. They viewed themselves as mature in the faith and were especially proud of their spiritual giftedness. But Paul pointed out that the problems in their church were evidence that they were not as mature as they thought. In fact, he said they were still thinking and behaving as spiritual infants. They had misjudged themselves indeed.

In the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul corrected the thinking that lay behind their cliques, or divisions. In chapters 5-6, he condemned the disorder within the church. These issues stemmed from pride and selfishness. Beginning in chapter 7, Paul answered several questions the Corinthians had asked him. In this lesson, we will cover only the first of these, a question about the value of marriage. In this area, Paul exhorted them to contentment.

The answer to the Corinthians' immaturities, and many of our own, is in applying the cross of Christ to our daily lives. The theme of the cross is the foundation for Paul's answers to the Corinthians' divisions, disorder, and questions. He told them that the cross of Christ is a simple but life-changing message, a message that will mature our thinking and behavior, as we regularly apply its principles.

I. **Division in the Corinthian Church** – 1 Corinthians 1-4

A. Background

i. The City of Corinth

1. *Geography and Commerce*: The Greek mainland is separated from the Peloponnesian Peninsula by a narrow isthmus, on which ancient Corinth was situated. In Paul's day, Corinth was the leading city in the Roman province of Achaia. Because of its location, it had strategic trade access to two seas. The harbor of Cenchrea lay about 4 miles (5-8 km) east of the city and the harbor of Lechaem was just over a mile (2 km) to the west. Since ancient ships had trouble navigating the winds around the southern cape of the Peloponnese, a roadway across the isthmus (and thus through Corinth) had been constructed as an alternative in the sixth century BC. All of these factors made Corinth an important commerce center, linking Europe and Asia.
2. *Founding*: The city of Corinth was destroyed in 146 BC for having revolted against Rome, but Julius Caesar rebuilt it and made it the capital of Achaia in 46 BC. Therefore, when Paul visited Corinth in AD 50 on his second missionary journey, the city was still relatively young.
3. *Religion and Immorality*: In addition to commerce, Corinth was also famous for its prominent Temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love, with its 1000 prostitutes. Service to the temple gave rise to such infamous immorality that, through the centuries, a "Corinthian girl" became an alternate term for a prostitute.

ii. Paul's Relationship to the Church

1. *Paul's Corinthian Ministry*: Paul's ministry in Corinth began with an 18-month visit in the early 50s AD on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). During that time, he first met his Jewish friends and coworkers Priscilla and Aquilla. He taught in the home of Titius Justus, next door to the synagogue, and the Lord made his ministry fruitful. After Paul left, he stayed in touch with the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, he references a letter he had written, one that apparently has since been lost. Obviously then, the epistle we call 1 Corinthians was not his first letter to them.
2. *Apollos*: Sometime after Paul's initial visit to Corinth, the Alexandrian Apollos (Acts 19) met Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, learned from them, and went to help the Corinthian church. During Paul's extended stay in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, Apollos returned to Ephesus from Corinth. Later, reports arrived indicating that the Corinthian church had problems and questions (1:11, 16:17).

3. *Paul's Letters to the Corinthians*: Although scholars are not in complete agreement, it seems Paul may have written the Corinthians at least four letters.
- a. We have already noted that “1 Corinthians” was not the first of his letters to them. It is self-described as having been written from Ephesus on Paul’s third missionary journey (1 Corinthians 16:8). Of all the New Testament epistles, only Romans is longer.
 - b. 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 mentions a “painful visit” Paul made to Corinth that was followed up by a harsh, disciplinary letter. Although this mysterious visit is not recorded in Acts, it must have occurred during Paul’s third missionary tour and seems to have been an emergency trip from Ephesus. The severe letter that followed was presumably Paul’s third letter to the Corinthians, and it too has been lost.
 - c. Finally, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia after he received an encouraging report about the Corinthians from Titus (2 Corinthians 7:5-7). While it was probably Paul’s fourth letter to the church, some believe that it contains at least part of the third (otherwise lost) letter.

B. Greeting – 1:1-9: Paul used the conventional Greco-Roman letter-writing format, which included a salutation with the name of the person(s) sending the letter at the very beginning. Sosthenes may have been Paul’s scribe. Another “Sosthenes” named in Acts was the synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:17 who was beaten in Gallio’s court in Corinth on Paul’s second missionary journey. If this was the same man, then he had been converted since that time. The letter begins with a brief expression of gratitude for the Corinthians, and then Paul jumps quite quickly to the problems at hand. Clearly, the problems were the motivation for writing the letter.

C. Report of Disunity – 1:10-16: The report indicated that factions had developed in the church, based on the Corinthians’ personal preferences for certain teachers. Some preferred Paul, who founded their church. Others favored the powerful teaching of Apollos. Still others preferred Cephas (the Aramaic name for the apostle Peter). Finally, a fourth clique proudly stated that they would follow no leader except Christ. Paul condemned their disunity. The speakers all taught soundly, but the Corinthians were making worldly judgments based on rhetorical skill. Paul referred to the simple message of the cross that he had preached among them as the solution to their pride.

D. The Message of the Cross – 1:17-25

- i. God’s Secret Wisdom: In 2:7, Paul calls the message of the cross “God’s secret wisdom” that had been hidden, but one that God destined for our glory since before time began. This secret wisdom is that God foreknew that sin would enter the world and alienate man from Him. As a result, and out of love for us, God had always planned to redeem us. He planned to lay aside some of the privileges and rights He enjoys in order to put on human flesh, enter time, suffer on earth, and ultimately die a horrible, sacrificial death for us. Although foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures, this secret plan was never fully understood until after Jesus rose from the dead and explained it to His disciples.
- ii. Worldly Wisdom: In the first century, and especially to Jews, death on a cross was considered shameful. Thus, a message about a man dying on a cross *to save others* was ridiculous to their ears. Paul contrasted this message of the cross with the wisdom of prideful human intellectualism. Still today, many think the gospel answers the human dilemma in a way that is too simple and unbelievable. But Paul challenged that claim, arguing that the secret plan of God is *powerful* to change one’s eternal destiny, as well as one’s present life.
- iii. The Maturing Message of the Cross: The Corinthians’ problem was that, although they had been saved by the message of the cross, they had not applied its message to everyday life. As a result, they remained immature in their faith. What they needed was to allow the message of the cross to empower and motivate their daily lives: as Christ laid down his life for me, I choose daily to lay down my life, my plans, my ego, and my preferences, and live as Jesus lived, and to die as Jesus died, in moment-by-moment surrender to the will of the Father. Far from gloomy, the message of the cross opens the way to the most abundant life one can imagine! The world fails to find true and lasting joy, peace, and satisfaction because it scorns as foolish the notion of laying down one’s life. Immature believers, like the Corinthians, are those who receive Jesus’ cross but refuse to take up their own.

E. Relevance to the Divisions in Corinth – 1:26-4:21: The divisiveness among the Corinthians reflected the worldly interest in living with “self” at the center. However, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). “Taking up our cross” means following Jesus’ example in laying aside our rights and preferences out of love for others. The Corinthians arrogantly insisted on their personal preferences, but pride is incompatible with the cross. Taking up one’s cross requires humility.

- i. God's Power Magnified in Ordinary People - 1:26-31: Most Christians are not among the people the world would call powerful and influential. Paul reminded the Corinthians that most of them were ordinary people. He said that God chooses the people the world thinks to be nothing so that when God's power in them is evident, the world will be forced to concede that the Divine is at work. Why then, did the Corinthians think that the special gifts of one teacher or another was what God would find worth of applause? They had forgotten that God's power is often best seen in people without any special, natural ability.
- ii. Paul as an Example - 1:17-18, 23-24; 2:1-5: As an example, Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were saved by his own preaching, which was "not with wise and persuasive words" but with the simple message of the cross. When Paul had first arrived in Corinth on his second missionary journey, he had recently been chased out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea and had had a relatively unproductive stay in Athens. Paul said he had not come to them with "eloquence or human wisdom" but "in weakness with great fear and trembling" (2:1, 3). He came at a time when he was unable to present with a dynamic rhetorical style, yet it was through his simple preaching of the cross ("Jesus Christ and Him crucified" [2:2]) that they had been saved. Again in 2 Corinthians, Paul affirmed that God's power is most evident when our own self-confidence and natural ability is removed (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).
- iii. God's Wisdom is Given by His Spirit – 2:6-3:1: What exactly was it that caused the Corinthians to receive Paul's simple message of the cross? Paul next explained that it is God's Spirit that gives spiritual discernment, so that people who formerly reject the message of the cross as foolish, receive it. Anyone without the Spirit will continue to think that God's wisdom is foolishness. Paul explained that mature Christians have the "mind of Christ" with which to make wise judgments. However, Paul did not consider the Corinthians this mature. They were still "worldly – mere infants in Christ" (3:1).
- iv. The Corinthians' Worldly Thinking about Their Teachers – 3:1-10: The Corinthians had not developed the mature habit of filtering their thinking through God's wisdom by His Spirit. If they had, they would have realized that every Bible teacher is just a servant of Christ (who alone has the power to make them grow) and that God uses one teacher to build on the work of another. All teachers are co-laborers with the single purpose of building up God's people.

v. Wise Builders – 3:10-23

1. Paul warned the Corinthians and their leaders about the basis for evaluating ministry. First, he reminded them that Jesus Christ is the sole foundation of the church and all sound doctrine is built on Him. Paul called God’s people His “building” (3:9). Later, in chapter 6, he says our bodies are God’s temples in an individual sense. But here, he speaks of believers as “God’s temple” in a *corporate* sense (3:16-17). Paul himself had laid the foundation of salvation in Christ for the Corinthians; Apollos had built on that foundation.
2. Next Paul evaluated the building of the church.
 - a. *The Quality of the Work*: He stated that the quality of each person’s work in building the Church will be exposed on the Day of Judgment. Just as fire burns away impurities, those works that are impure will be burned like “wood, hay, and straw,” while those that are pure will come forth like “gold, silver, and costly stones.” Those who have worked with pure motives (4:5), sought only God’s approval (John 5:44), trusted Him alone for results (Philippians 2:13), and presented sound doctrine (2 Timothy 2:15) will be rewarded.
 - a. *The People Being Evaluated*: Paul said that those whose works are burned will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Since these builders will be saved, Paul clearly wasn’t speaking of the judgment of unbelievers. He was talking about the testing of the works of believers that will occur at the judgment seat of Christ. He later wrote to the Corinthians, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). This judgment will not be to determine a believer’s salvation, which is already assured, but to evaluate their lives for the purpose of reward. Although Paul seems to have church leaders and teachers specifically in mind in this passage, in Ephesians, Paul taught that it is the responsibility of *every* believer to use their spiritual gifts to build the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

vi. Paul’s Appeal – 3:18-4:21

1. *Our Great Position in Christ* – 3:18-23: Paul wrote, “All things are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (3:22-23). He reminded the Corinthians of the greatness of the believers’ position and future in Christ. He called the Corinthians to think and behave maturely, in accordance with our high calling. They had been

boasting over their teachers. He called them to instead think and behave according to the wisdom of God’s Spirit, the wisdom of the cross – not in pride and divisiveness, but in a humble and unifying way.

2. *Diagnosis and Cure* – 4:1-21

- a. If any of these leaders had hidden motives, the Lord would bring them to light. Each leader would be rewarded according to God’s measuring stick. The Corinthians’ problem was that they had proudly passed judgment on their leaders about issues “beyond what is written” (4:6) in scripture. As long as their teachers were presenting sound doctrine, they had no right to judge them simply because of their different teaching styles.
- b. Like a loving father (4:15), Paul wanted them to see the error of their ways and repent. He mentioned that he would be coming to them soon and did not want to have to discipline them (4:19-21). The cure for the Corinthians was to become like Paul and the other apostles: not prideful, but humble and sacrificial (4:8-13).

Summary Statement: Paul’s response to division within the Corinthian church was an exhortation to humility.

Principle: *The simple but maturing message of the cross humbles us.*

Paul illustrates this by writing of the humble service of the apostles:

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, but we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment, we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world (4:9-13).

The enemies of the gospel always have been and will be critical of the cross. The Greeks and modern intellectuals, who trust in their own wisdom, find it foolish. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is just one example of the many who have considered it a message of weakness. Although the Hindu founder of modern India, Mahatma Ghandi, found many things about Christianity attractive and could accept Jesus as a divine teacher and martyr who died an exemplary death, he could not accept that there was any “mysterious or miraculous virtue” in Christ’s death.¹

The message is also a stumbling block for Jews, Muslims, and all those who trust in their own righteousness. For Muslims, no important prophet would die such a disgraceful death, and first century Jews could not have imagined that the promised Messiah would come to such an ignoble end.

The message of the cross is the polar opposite of worldly religions and philosophies. It is also the polar opposite of our sin nature. It *tears down all human pride*: the cross is a message of glory through suffering, life through death, exaltation through humbling – it is the ultimate mystery.

Application: Brothers and sisters, are we boastful, like the Corinthians? A spirit of arrogance facilitates divisiveness in our homes, schools, churches, or workplaces. Do we have strong opinions and ideas about the programs in our churches, the way our homes or businesses should be managed, or a preferred method of education? Even more dangerously, do we pass spiritual judgments on others? Truly mature believers are humble in spirit. In them, living for Christ and dying for Him are indistinguishable, and as a result, the power of God is evident. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (4:20). With this in mind, have we evaluated ourselves soberly (Romans 12:3)?

Transition: The Corinthians’ pride was manifested in their divisions, and it highlighted their immaturity. Next, Paul addressed two issues that were causing disorder in the church.

II. Disorder in the Corinthian Church – 1 Corinthians 5-6

A. The Case of Incest in the Corinthian Church – 5:1-13

- i. *The Man’s Sin:* In Paul’s day, except in strongholds of Judaism, there was little recognition of God’s moral standard. The Corinthian church was comprised primarily of people from pagan backgrounds (Acts 18:5-11). A man in the church apparently had an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. The woman was not his mother. Nevertheless, not only did the Old Testament forbid it, this particular action was even forbidden by Roman law (5:1). Paul did not accuse the woman, so she probably was not a believer.
- ii. *The Sin of the Corinthian Church:* Paul did, however, accuse the Corinthian church, saying, “You are proud!” (5:2) and “your boasting is not good” (5:6). Far from grieving over their brother’s sin, the church members apparently prided themselves for their tolerant attitude. It has always been easy for God’s people to excuse the things the culture permits as only “small sins.” As previously mentioned, Corinth was known for its sexual promiscuity. The Church in every generation and location has had “cultural blind spots.”ⁱⁱ

- iii. *The Call for Disciplinary Action*: The Bible uses yeast as a metaphor for the impact of good and evil alike (Matthew 13:33, 16:6). The smallest amount impacts an entire batch. Paul related this metaphor negatively to the impact of the man's incest on the church and instructed the Corinthians to take immediate disciplinary action against him. They were to excommunicate the man, with the hope that such a serious action would cause the man to rethink his actions and repent. Such an approach would be inappropriate with an unbeliever, but within the Church, God's people are not to tolerate ongoing, unrepentant sin.

B. Lawsuits

- i. The Issue Clarified: Paul had been told that the disorder within the Corinthian church was not only because of their tolerance of an overt sexual sin but also because some church members were taking other church members to civil court to have their differences settled. The Greeks were very fond of the courts. This selfish mindset was another cultural blind spot. The fact that the Corinthians were unable or unwilling to settle disputes privately within the church was further evidence of their deep divisions. Paul was not saying that believers should never go to court. While a prisoner, Paul himself appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11-12). The court system may be God's provision to protect a wronged believer (Romans 13:1-7). However, it hurts the church's testimony when believers must look to the civil government to settle a dispute between believers.
- ii. The Corinthians' Pride
 1. The Corinthians prided themselves for being wise. Paul shamed them by repeating the phrase "do you not know" six times in this chapter. He asked whether no one among them was wise enough to judge a dispute among believers (6:5).
 2. Chiding the Corinthians for their inability to settle disputes, Paul asked, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world... Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (6:2-3). The idea that saints will participate in future judgment may have found its roots in the Greek version (the Septuagint) of Daniel 7:22.ⁱⁱⁱ In Revelation 2:26, Jesus promised to give authority over the nations to those who are victorious and do His will to the end, but the Scriptures offer no other details about this. Paul wondered how they could think God would give them wisdom to judge matters of such vast importance and yet not give them the wisdom to judge the minor disputes for which they took one another to court.

3. Paul concluded, “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (6:7b) A Christian should choose to be taken advantage of rather than damage their testimony or that of Christ’s church. We carry His reputation with us and we must take that very seriously.

C. Sexual Immorality among Christians – 6:12-20

- i. Paul’s Argument against Cultural Permission: Paul ends this segment on church disorder by returning to the issue of sexual promiscuity. Apparently, the phrase, “I have the right to do anything” was a slogan of the day, and again, such cultural ideas always work their way into the church. Paul argues that with regard to the believer’s body, the issue is not only one of permission but also of what is beneficial. For instance, the results of a poor diet are almost always evidenced by poor health. However, some of the other poor choices we may make with regard to our bodies may not always be so easily and outwardly evidenced.
- ii. A Higher View of Our Bodies
 1. Next, Paul elevates their view of their bodies, reminding them that since the Holy Spirit resides within us, we take Him with us wherever we go. Our bodies are His temple.
 2. Furthermore, at the Resurrection, our bodies will be transformed. We are to treat them according to what they will be one day (6:14).
 3. Thirdly, Christians’ bodies are “members of the Lord” (6:15). Our bodies really do not belong to us since Jesus died to purchase us for God (6:19). He expects us to honor Him with our bodies.
- iii. Conclusion: God forbids sex outside marriage. The Creator knows what will make our lives good and what will reap destruction. He preserves sex for marriage alone because it is the only safe place for that kind of intimacy. Today in western countries, many (if not most) single adults are completely unaware or unconcerned that sexual intimacy outside marriage (or as a prelude to marriage) is sin. Too often, the Church has turned “a blind eye” to such behavior. Paul’s timely reminder is that “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (5:6).

Summary Statement: The Corinthians were demanding their “rights,” in court and in private. Paul reminded them that they were not their own; they were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Principle: *The simple but maturing message of the cross calls for the crucifixion of selfish passions.*

The Corinthians struggled with the selfish passions in their sexual attitudes and behavior and the anger, greed, and resentment that led them to civil court. But there are other selfish passions that can hinder our testimony and ministry, such as a desire for popularity and for personal comfort.

Application: Friends, is the life of Christ on display in such a powerful way in your life that you regularly draw others to a saving knowledge of Christ? If not, could it be because your selfish passions have not yet been crucified? It is possible for a believer to have been saved and yet remain spiritually immature for most of their life because they have been unwilling to have their selfish passions crucified. We cannot crucify ourselves. The more focused we are on a sin, the more it dominates us. Crucifying the flesh is a work of God's Spirit. What selfish passions do you need to bring to the cross? Will you sincerely and completely surrender this area of your life in prayer today, ask other trusted Christians for accountability, and shift your focus to the freedom and life-giving power of Christ?

The cross of Christ is a message for everyday living and a maturing believer learns to live by its principles.

Transition: Beginning in chapter 7, Paul answers the first of several questions sent to him by the Corinthians. This lesson covers Paul's answer to the first question, which is about the value of marriage.

III. Question from the Corinthian Church – 1 Corinthians 7: Jews traditionally favor the married state^{iv}, but since the Corinthian believers were mostly from pagan backgrounds, some apparently listened to the cynics of the day and were questioning its social value.^v Paul addressed the issue of whether a Christian should marry. But first, he had words for those who were already married. In light of the problems that have already been presented, it is not surprising that sexuality and unity once again come up in the discussion.

A. Paul's Advice to the Married – 7:2-16

- i. Prioritizing Sex – 7:2-7: Paul reminded married people that they must not deprive their spouse of sex. Women with young children must especially remember to keep prioritizing sex with their husbands, and older women must not come to believe their husbands' sexual desires have passed. Men, on the other hand, must guard against selfishness in sex, ensuring their wives' needs are satisfied, not merely their own. This requires unselfishness of both the husband and the wife.
- ii. Separation – 7:10-16: Paul said that married people must not separate from one another. He gives two specific instructions about this.

1. If a separation has occurred, then the believing spouses are not to remarry but to seek reconciliation (7:10-11). We can recall that Jesus permitted divorce in the case of adultery (Matthew 19:9 [He may have intended ongoing adultery]).
2. Additionally, Paul said that married believers should not divorce an *unbelieving* spouse who is willing to stay married (7:12-13). However, if the unbelieving partner leaves, let them do so (7:15).

B. Paul's Advice to the Unmarried – 7:8-9, 25-38

i. Singleness and the “Present Crisis”

1. Paul quoted, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” He also told those who are not married to remain as they are, unless they had trouble controlling their physical passions (7:1, 8-9). Yet in his other writings, he favored the married state (Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Timothy 3:2, 12, 1 Timothy 4:1-3). Perhaps his comments should then be understood as a temporary stance he was advocating in light of the “present crisis” (7:26). He said that the time to do the Lord’s work is short (7:29). What did he mean? Some believe these comments reflect Paul’s view that Christ would return in his lifetime or very shortly after. However, it is also possible that the “present crisis” was a growing threat of serious persecution that would restrict the church’s witness,^{vi} and thus leave only a short time for single believers to devote themselves fully to God’s work. This seems to make more sense, since Paul favored marriage at other times and in other places.
 2. Paul went on to explain that married people have obligations that will distract them from focusing uniquely on kingdom work (7:32-35). He did not condemn marriage but pointed out that singleness ought to be valued as an opportunity to be single-minded in one’s focus on the Lord.
- ii. “No Command from the Lord:” When Paul says in verse 25 that he has “no command from the Lord” about virgins marrying, he may mean that the Lord Jesus never gave any teaching specific to this situation in His earthly ministry. Yet Paul’s “trustworthy” counsel, since it was given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be regarded as authoritative.

- iii. Advice to the Engaged – 7:36-38: In the culture of Paul’s day, engagement was a legal and financial contract as marriage is today, only without consummation by sex and living together.^{vii} In this respect, Paul’s admonition to either marry or simply remain in the legally binding engagement without marrying isn’t transferrable advice to western engagements today.
- iv. Paul’s Advice to the Widowed – 7:39-40: To the widowed, Paul offered the freedom to remarry if they chose, but the widow or widower must remarry a believer and should first consider that they might be happier remaining single.

C. The “Remain” Principle: 7:17-24: Paul called upon people in all stations of life to be content. In this context, he even brings up slavery, saying that slaves should remain in their present position. Paul wasn’t advocating slavery. Slavery is a social evil. In fact, he said, “If you can gain your freedom, do so” (7:21). But since slave revolts had a history of being brutally repressed, Paul’s advice was thus practical.^{viii} “He knew that slavery is not the ideal condition for human beings, and he wished that no one be enslaved to anyone but Christ (Romans 6:18; Ephesians 6:6). Nevertheless, he insisted as a general policy, ‘Don’t let it trouble you’.”^{ix} All of Paul’s advice is given in the context of contentment with one’s station in life. Whether married or unmarried, slave or free, one should have full confidence in God’s sovereign purpose.

Summary Statement: Paul responded to the Corinthians’ question about the value of marriage with an exhortation to keep the place in life to which God had called them. Spiritual maturity is not defined by a believer’s station in life but by their ability to show contentment in that station.

Principle: *The simple but maturing message of the cross results in contentment.*

Whether a man was circumcised or uncircumcised wasn’t really of great importance. Freedom from slavery wasn’t the main issue. Whether a person is married or single isn’t really what is most important. What is most important is that God’s power is on display in our lives through the simple message of the cross. Once our personal passions and preferences have been put to death, we can live contentedly. A truly content person is an amazing testimony!

Application: Are you a person who has underlying contentment in any and every situation? Or do you have a reputation for being a complainer? Contentment is characteristic of the believer whose personal preferences and desires have been nailed to the cross. Paul told the Philippians, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (4:11-13). *Whatever our state in this life, we can content ourselves with what God has done for us in Christ.*

Conclusion

The Corinthians may have been shocked by Paul’s assessment of them. They had misjudged their maturity and needed to apply the simple but powerful message of the cross to their daily lives. How would you evaluate your present maturity, based on your daily application of its message? There will always be some who shun, deny, and mock the cross, but for the truly mature, it is the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24).

ⁱGandhi, Mahatma (1948). *Gandhi: An Autobiography* (p. 113). London: Jonathan Cape Publications, 1966.

ⁱⁱ Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). *Vol. 7: I & II Corinthians*. Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (97). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oster, R. (1995). *I Corinthians* (1 Co 6:2). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

^{iv} Mare, W. Harold (1994). *I Corinthians: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition* (625). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

^v Thiselton, A. C. (2000). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 487). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

^{vi} Mare, W. Harold (1994). *I Corinthians: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition* (629). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

^{vii} Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.) (1 Co 7:25–38). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

^{viii} Keener, C. S., & InterVarsity Press. (1993). *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (1 Co 7:26). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

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