

## **DYSFUNCTIONAL GRACE - 1 CORINTHIANS**

### **Sermon topics, texts, themes, ideas**

#### **Overview**

What happens when the Gospel reaches a jacked-up, irreligious, broken group of people? The answer is that the church is messy. Gospel transformation does not come quickly or easily in most of our lives. In the first century, Corinth was as cosmopolitan a city as you could find. The ancient Greek city and sea port was conquered by the Romans, but remained a significant and influential metropolis of commerce, government, and culture. It was also a city filled with broken sexuality, pluralistic religion, greed, and brutality. When Paul came to preach the Gospel and plant a church there, the result was a dysfunctional group of people who had been saved by grace, but struggled through the process of transformation. Paul's letter to this church helps us take a look at how the grace of God transforms people when the culture is idolatrous, the church is messy, and temptations run deep.

This is such a timely book for us. The culture around us is increasingly becoming like that of Corinth, with similar pop-culture influences and popular beliefs. The Corinthians were pluralistic with a myriad of spiritual beliefs and idols worshiped. They valued spirituality more than belief in a specific God. Furthermore, the spirituality of the culture led to a sexually saturated culture, with much of the "worship" of the culture tied to all kind of sexual practices. When followers of Jesus would marry and remain monogamous, it was viewed as bizarre, and even a rejection of the worship in Corinth. By God's grace, we have been given a glimpse of a church seeking to figure out faithful living to Christ in Corinthian culture. Our culture is becoming increasingly pluralistic and sexually confused. As we seek to preach the Gospel faithfully and make disciples in our culture, we will find that people will have the same challenges and questions encountered by Paul in his interaction with the church in Corinth. Spending a season in this letter will help us as a church living in a changing culture.

#### **Author**

This letter was written by the Apostle Paul, the Gospel globetrotter. Paul, whose Jewish birth name was Saul, was a zealous Jew, part of the religious Jewish sect of the Pharisees. His belief was in the One True God of Israel revealed in the Old Testament, and he was committed to adherence to the laws of God. He was a Bible scholar and teacher, but failed to believe in Jesus early in his life. He was also a Roman citizen, which was strange for a Jewish person. He was deeply versed in both Jewish thought and theology and Roman culture and customs. Early in life his zeal for Judaism led him to persecute the early believers in Jesus (Acts 6-8), even standing in approval when they were martyred. But God saved Paul through a miraculous vision as he was on the way to the city of Damascus to arrest believers in Jesus (Acts 9). After a period of personal growth and discipleship, including stints in Damascus, Jerusalem, Tarsus, and Antioch, Paul was sent out on mission around the Roman world to preach the Gospel and plant churches. Paul ends up taking three trips, traveling to places like Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), Cyprus, and Macedonia (modern day Greece, and the location of Corinth). On his second missionary journey, in approximately AD 50, Paul visited Corinth for the first time, preaching there and planting the Corinthian church (Acts 18).

Paul arrived in Corinth after traveling through other areas of Macedonia, including Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens. After preaching in Athens, Paul came to this sea port town.

He met a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish believers who had been expelled from Rome. Like Aquila and Priscilla, Paul was a tent-maker by trade, so they went into business together; but more importantly, they started working in the city to make Christ known. Paul preached first to the Jews at the Synagogue but also to Greeks in the marketplaces of the town. Many from both groups believed, and a church was planted, made up of people from both Jewish and Greek backgrounds and belief systems. As persecution grew, Paul received a vision from the Lord in a dream, as God told him, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many people in this city who are My people." (Acts 18:9-10). Therefore, Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months proclaiming Christ and leading this cosmopolitan church. Eventually, more persecution broke out, forcing Paul to move on and continue his journeys. Eventually Paul ends up in Ephesus, and from there he writes two letters to this church. The first is lost to us, but was responded to by both the Corinthian church and the messengers. The Corinthians had questions, and Paul's courier told him about some considerable issues that had arisen within the church. In response, Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth sometime in the Spring around AD 53-55.

### **Recipients**

The city of Corinth is one of the most populated and important cities in the Macedonian region of the Roman Empire. Shaped deeply by Hellenism (the growth and spread of Greek philosophy, religious, education, ideas, etc.), Corinth became the seat of commerce and wealth in that area of the world. The site was also known for its artistry and architecture. Corinth was at the base of a small mountain near the sea, sitting on an isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula; it sat on a section of ground where the Aegean Sea and the western Mediterranean were separated by a mere 3.7 miles of land. Using slave labor, they had created a passage over the land (something like putting a ship on a trailer, pulling it across this small section of land and dropping it on the other side) that allowed sailors to cut off weeks of travel that would have taken them way further south and past the entire peninsula. So, Corinth was a busy sea port, constantly filled with sailors and sea-voyagers. In many ways, it would have resembled something like New Orleans and the culture of Bourbon Street. The ease of access, beauty of the region, available goods from ships, and the size of the city made this a destination city for travelers, and for people leaving other cultures seeking prosperity and a new start. The city had a myriad of temples and houses of worship to various gods and goddesses in the Greco-Roman pantheon. This included a temple to the goddess Aphrodite on the side of the mountain and visible throughout the city, which had as many as 1,000 temple prostitutes visited by many of the men living in and visiting the city as an act of "worship". The result was a decadent, multi-cultural, spiritually diverse, and sexually charged city. Paul intentionally sought out cities such as this one in order to proclaim Christ and plant churches.

Imagine planting a church on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. Needless to say, the type of people being reached and the challenges to their spiritual growth might be a little different than those in Eureka. I have a friend who planted a church a block off Bourbon Street, and the challenge was discipling new believers who were former prostitutes and pimps, drug dealers and bar workers, sailors, and entertainers from the district. They came out of a culture with different views of morality and spirituality, and the work was messy. But God saved people and the work was beautiful.

Same is true for Corinth. God saved people from both the Jewish crowd and the Greek

culture, He placed them in Christ, and therefore in a community of faith together. It was beautiful and messy. Some were pushing the congregation to a hyper-legalistic, moralistic view of spirituality, even rejecting sex in marriage as evil. Others were falling back into the lifestyle struggles and sin issues from which they came, causing some to push for acceptance of any lifestyle choice and sexual identity within the church. By the time Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, he had already penned a letter speaking against associating with those who claim the name of Jesus but continued to live sexually immoral lifestyles (1 Corinthians 5:9). As a result of this diversity in viewpoints, the church was experiencing deep division among the members, with people in the church latching on to differing church leaders and the emphases of their ministry. This division was hurting people within the church and wrecking their witness in the world. Paul had received word from some of the members of the Corinthian church about the nature and challenge of this division. He also received some questions raised by some in the church, possibly passed to Paul in a letter from the church. The letter of 1 Corinthians is from Paul to this church he had planted, pastored, and led for a season, to correct their errors, call them to unity, and answer these questions. The issues are somewhat crazy and the church is a hot mess. They have a man hooking up with his stepmom and they are coming to church together. They are taking extra hits from the Communion wine and racing each other to a potluck meal, but excluding the poor from the dinner table after they took the cup and bread at the Lord's Table. They are fighting over trivial things as they claim to follow key Christian leaders. They are suing each other in court and offending each other by eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul speaks with clarity and sternness, calling this church to holiness and unity. Yet, he is also joyful and thankful for the church, and expresses deep love for these people, and hope that their presence in Corinth will result in the advancement of God's mission in the city. He is patient, loving, and gracious to this messy band of believers who are trying to figure out the Christ-life in a multi-cultural, pluralistic, and sexually charged city.

### **Purpose and Themes**

The Apostle Paul is writing a letter of loving instruction to a church in a messy town. The letter addresses both spiritual struggles existing within the church as well as theological and practical spiritual questions being raised by the church. Paul is thankful for the way the Gospel took root in these people, as their faith in Jesus produced all kinds of wonderful Spiritual gifts. He believes the Christ who saved them will sustain them, but also knows that their sanctification involves their partnership in the Gospel work that has taken place in their lives and church. So he continually reminds them of the grace of God given through the Gospel, and the call from the Gospel to live lives of unity among other believers and holiness in their character and values. Through this letter, Paul addresses some significant theological and life issues often faced within the church. They include:

- Disunity & division in the church
- Foolishness and worldly wisdom
- The importance and content of preaching
- The problem with believers in Jesus who do not grow
- The importance and unimportance of Christian leaders
- Church discipline
- Sexual immorality inside and outside the church
- Lawsuits among believers
- Sex, marriage, and singleness

- Christian freedom, the weaker brother, and legalism
- The goal of ministry and the care of ministers
- The danger of idolatry and salad bar religion
- Hats in the church - who should wear them
- Communion and the sacraments
- Speaking in tongues and other Spiritual gifts
- The nature of the church as a body
- The importance of love
- Proper and orderly worship
- Jesus' resurrection and ours

## **1 Corinthians Outline (from ESV Study Bible)**

### I. Epistolary Introduction to the Letter's Main Themes (1:1–9)

- A. Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity (1:1–3)
- B. Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4–9)

### II. Divisions over Christian Preachers (1:10–4:21)

- A. The problem reported (1:10–17a)
  - The nature of God's wisdom (1:17b–2:16)
  - God's wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (3:1–4:21)

### III. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1–6:20)

- A. Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline (5:1–13)
- B. Trivial cases before unrighteous judges (6:1–11)
- C. Sexual immorality and the body's resurrection (6:12–20)

### IV. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)

- A. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
- B. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
- C. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)

### V. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)

- A. Head coverings and worship (11:2–16)
- B. Social snobbery at the Lord's Table (11:17–34)
- C. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1–14:40)

### VI. The Futility of Faith if the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1–58)

- A. The truthfulness of the traditions about Christ's resurrection (15:1–11)
- B. Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of believers (15:12–34)
- C. The nature of the resurrection body (15:35–58)

### VII. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1–12)

### VIII. Closing Admonitions and Greetings (16:13–24)