PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

The King's Messy Family

1 Corinthians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Messy Family: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

And it fits this book almost too well, because the church in Corinth thought it knew it all. They were gifted, smart, confident, and proud of it. They also had cliques, lawsuits, sex scandals, drunkenness at church dinners, arguments about food, and worship services so chaotic that visitors thought they'd lost their minds. If you've ever thought church people should have it all together, the Corinthians will cure you of that idea fast.

Here's the good news. God didn't give up on them. Paul, the man who started their church, wrote them a long, honest, sometimes funny, sometimes blunt letter to help them grow up. It's the letter we call 1 Corinthians. It deals with real problems: who to follow, how to handle sex and relationships, whether to get married, what to do when Christians disagree, how to worship, and what happens after you die.

It also contains some of the most beautiful words ever written. The famous chapter on love that gets read at weddings? It's here. It was written to a church that was being anything but loving. The clearest explanation in the Bible of why Jesus' resurrection matters? Also here. God put some of His best words in a letter to His messiest family.

So if your life is a little messy, or your church is, or your friends are, this letter is for you. Read it slowly. Read it honestly. And watch how often Paul brings every problem back to the same place: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 16 chapters of 1 Corinthians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is dealing with, adds background about the world the Corinthians lived in (a rich, crowded Roman city full of temples, games, and trade), and shows how Paul brings the gospel to bear on everyday problems.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene introduces the city of Corinth, how the church began, and why Paul wrote. Don't skip it. This letter is one half of a conversation, and it helps to know what the other half was saying.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of 1 Corinthians for yourself. Paul told the Corinthians to judge for themselves what he said. Do the same with me. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and Romans, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Like the Romans volume, this book follows the letter chapter by chapter, explaining Paul's reasoning, key terms, and the setting in Corinth. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Background is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

First Corinthians speaks directly to subjects teenagers face: sexuality, peer pressure, identity, divisions among friends, and what it means to belong to a church. It also includes several passages that faithful Christians interpret differently, including head coverings (chapter 11), spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues (chapters 12 to 14), women speaking in church (14:34–35), and Paul's teaching on marriage, singleness, and divorce (chapter 7), as well as his words on sexual sin (chapters 5 and 6). I have tried to present what the text says plainly, to note briefly and fairly where

Christians have understood it differently, and to leave room for you to guide the conversation in line with your own church's teaching.

Where the NIV notes significant manuscript differences or alternative readings, such as the placement of 14:34–35 after verse 40 in a few manuscripts, I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The chapters on sexuality address the subject honestly but without graphic detail, at a level suitable for younger teens. You may want to read chapters 5 to 7 together.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see that God's family has always been messy, that He loves it anyway, and that the way forward is always love, the most excellent way.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land, only about four miles wide, that connects mainland Greece to the large peninsula to the south. It had a port on each side, one facing west toward Italy and one facing east toward Asia. Ships unloaded cargo on one side and carried it across to the other, and small ships were sometimes dragged across the land on a stone track. Almost everything traveling between Rome and the East passed through. That made Corinth rich, busy, and crowded with people from everywhere.

The old Greek city had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. About a century later, Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony, and many of its new settlers were freed slaves. By Paul's day it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, a booming city of new money where people could rise quickly and loved to show off their status.

Temples, Games, and Status

Above the city rose a huge rocky hill with a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sex. Temples to Apollo, Asclepius (the god of healing), and many other gods filled the city. Much of the meat sold in the market came from animals sacrificed in those temples, and temple dining rooms were where people held parties and business dinners.

Every two years Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, one of the four great athletic festivals of the Greek world, along with the Olympic Games. Crowds poured in. Athletes trained for months to win a crown made of plants.

Corinth also had a reputation. In earlier Greek times, the word corinthianize was used to mean living immorally. Scholars debate how fair that reputation was by Paul's day, but Corinth was certainly a place where pleasure, money, and status were everywhere. Sound familiar?

How the Church Began

Paul first came to Corinth around AD 50 or 51, on his second missionary journey. You can read the story in Acts 18. He arrived from Athens, nervous and worn out. He found work making tents with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had just been forced out of Rome. He preached in the synagogue until he was thrown out, then moved next door to the house of a Gentile named Titius Justus. Even Crispus, the synagogue leader, believed.

One night the Lord told Paul in a vision not to be afraid and to keep speaking, because He had many people in the city. Paul stayed a year and a half. An inscription found at Delphi tells us when Gallio, the Roman official in Acts 18, governed Achaia, which is one of the best clues for dating Paul's travels.

Who Was in the Church

The church Paul left behind was a mix. A few members were wealthy or influential, like Crispus, Gaius, and Erastus. Most were not. Paul reminds them that not many of them were wise or powerful or from important families. There were Jews and Gentiles,

slaves and free people, men and women. They met in homes, probably no more than a few dozen people in each house.

That mix created problems. Rich members and poor members didn't know how to eat together. People who had grown up worshiping idols and people who had grown up in the synagogue had very different instincts. And everyone had absorbed the values of Corinth: impress people, win arguments, climb the ladder, and look out for yourself.

Why Paul Wrote

A few years after leaving Corinth, Paul was in Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea, around AD 53 to 55. News reached him from two directions. Some people from the household of a woman named Chloe told him that the church was splitting into rival groups. Then three men from Corinth, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, arrived, probably carrying a letter from the church with a list of questions.

Paul had actually written them an earlier letter that we don't have; he mentions it in 5:9. So 1 Corinthians is really Paul's second letter to them, and it's half of an ongoing conversation. Sometimes he quotes their own slogans back to them. When you see phrases in quotation marks in your Bible, like everything is permissible or I have the right to do anything, Paul is often quoting what the Corinthians were saying, and then answering it.

The Map

First Corinthians isn't built like Romans, as one long argument. It's more like Paul working through a list of problems and questions, one at a time, always bringing them back to Jesus.

Chapters 1 to 4: Divisions. The church is splitting into fan clubs. Paul points them to the cross, which turns human ideas of wisdom and status upside down.

Chapters 5 and 6: Moral problems Paul has heard about. Sexual sin the church is tolerating, and believers suing each other.

Chapters 7 to 14: Answers to their questions. Marriage and singleness, food offered to idols, Paul's rights as an apostle, worship, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts, with the famous chapter on love right in the middle.

Chapter 15: The resurrection. Some of them doubted that the dead would be raised. Paul explains why everything depends on it.

Chapter 16: Practical matters. A collection for poor believers, travel plans, and greetings.

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CHAPTER 1

Fan Clubs

1 Corinthians 1

Paul opens the way letters did in his day: his name, the people he's writing to, and a greeting. He writes with "our brother Sosthenes." That might be the same Sosthenes who led the synagogue in Corinth and got beaten up in front of the Roman governor in Acts 18. If so, the Corinthians knew him well.

Then Paul calls the church something surprising. He writes "to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people." Sanctified means set apart for God, made holy. Wait until you see what this church has been up to. Paul calls them holy anyway. That's not because they've earned it. It's because of what Jesus has done for them. Their behavior needs to catch up with who they already are.

Paul thanks God for them. They have every spiritual gift. They're rich in speech and knowledge. And God will keep them firm to the end. "God is faithful." Paul starts with grace, even for a church this messy.

Then he gets to the problem. "My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Chloe's People**

We don't know much about Chloe. She was probably a businesswoman, and the people from her household may have been slaves or workers who traveled for her between Corinth and Ephesus. What's interesting is that Paul names his source. He isn't spreading anonymous gossip. He tells them exactly where his information came from.

The church has split into fan clubs. "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'"

Think of it like rival groups of fans. Paul founded the church, so some people were loyal to him. Apollos was a brilliant speaker from Alexandria who came later, and some people liked his style better. Cephas is Peter's name in Aramaic, and some people may have preferred the original apostle. And then there was the group that said, we just follow Christ, which sounds great until you realize they were probably using Jesus' name to look more spiritual than everyone else.

Paul's response is a set of sharp questions. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Obviously not. Paul is so worried about people making him into a celebrity that he says he's glad he didn't baptize many of them. Then he catches himself: well, there was Crispus and Gaius, and also the household of Stephanas, and beyond that he can't remember. It's a funny, very human moment.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Speakers and Status**

In Corinth, public speaking was entertainment and status. Professional speakers called sophists traveled from city to city, dazzling crowds with clever arguments and beautiful words, and charging high fees. People had their favorites, like fans of a celebrity or an influencer. The Corinthians were

> judging their Christian teachers the same way: who's more impressive, who's more eloquent, who makes us look better for following him.

Then Paul goes straight to the center of everything. Christ sent him to preach the gospel, "not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

"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."

To the Corinthians' neighbors, the message of a crucified Savior was ridiculous. Jews wanted miraculous signs. Greeks wanted clever philosophy. "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." A Messiah who dies on a cross looked weak. A God who saves people through an executed criminal looked foolish.

But that's exactly the point. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

Then Paul tells them to look around the room. Not many of you were wise by human standards, he says. Not many were powerful. Not many came from important families. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, the nobodies to overturn the somebodies. Why? "So that no one may boast before him."

That's the cure for fan clubs. If you understand the cross, you can't brag about anything except Jesus. "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

KEY VERSE

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.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some ways Christians today form fan clubs around leaders, churches, or styles?
2. Why would the message of a crucified Savior have sounded foolish in Corinth? Does it sound foolish to anyone you know?
3. Paul says God chose the weak and the nobodies. How does that change the way you see yourself? The way you see others?

CHAPTER 2

The Mind of Christ

1 Corinthians 2

Paul keeps going on the same theme, and now he talks about how he first came to Corinth. “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom.” He didn’t try to impress them. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

That’s an amazing statement from someone as brilliant as Paul. He was highly educated. He could quote poets and philosophers. He could have tried to out-argue the best speakers in Corinth. Instead he made a decision: I’m going to talk about Jesus and the cross.

And he admits he wasn’t confident. “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.” Remember, he’d just come from Athens, where many people laughed at him. Acts 18 says the Lord had to tell him in a vision not to be afraid. Paul’s preaching wasn’t polished, but it came “with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Why did God do it that way? “So that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Weak and Afraid**
>
> It’s encouraging that the apostle Paul felt nervous. If you’ve ever been scared to talk about your faith, worried you’d say it wrong or that people would laugh, you’re in good company. God doesn’t need you to be impressive. He needs you to be faithful. The power is His.

Then Paul says that there is a real wisdom in the Christian message, just not the kind the world values. It's God's wisdom, a mystery hidden for ages and now revealed. The rulers of this age didn't understand it. If they had, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Paul quotes Isaiah: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—that's what God has prepared for those who love Him. People often read this verse at funerals as a description of heaven, and that's not wrong. But Paul's point here is that God has now revealed these things to us by His Spirit.

Only a person's own spirit knows their thoughts, Paul says. In the same way, only God's Spirit knows the thoughts of God. And believers have received that Spirit, so that they can understand what God has freely given them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spiritual and Unspiritual**
>
> The Corinthians loved to think of themselves as spiritual, a step above ordinary believers. Paul turns their word around. The truly spiritual person isn't the one with the most impressive gifts or knowledge. It's the one who understands the cross, because the Spirit has opened their eyes. Without the Spirit, the gospel looks like foolishness. With the Spirit, it looks like the wisdom of God.

The person without the Spirit doesn't accept the things of God. They seem foolish to him, because they can only be understood through the Spirit. That's why arguing someone into the kingdom rarely works. You can explain, answer questions, and give reasons, and you should. But in the end, it's the Spirit who opens people's eyes.

The chapter ends with a stunning claim: "But we have the mind of Christ." Through the Spirit, believers can begin to think the way Jesus thinks. Not perfectly yet. But really.

KEY VERSE

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul came to Corinth in weakness and fear. Why do you think God often works through people who feel weak?
2. If you had to talk about your faith with a friend, what would you focus on? Why did Paul focus on the cross?
3. What would it look like for you to have the mind of Christ in one specific situation this week?

CHAPTER 3

Only God Makes It Grow

1 Corinthians 3

The Corinthians thought they were spiritually advanced. Paul tells them the truth: they're babies. He couldn't talk to them as spiritual people but as "mere infants in Christ." He had to give them milk, not solid food, and they still aren't ready for more.

How does he know? "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" The proof that they're spiritually immature isn't that they don't know enough. It's that they can't get along.

That's worth thinking about. Spiritual maturity isn't measured by how many verses you know, how loud you worship, or how impressive your gifts are. It's measured in large part by how you treat people.

Then Paul goes back to the fan clubs. What is Apollos, anyway? What is Paul? "Only servants." Then he gives a picture from farming. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Farming in Corinth**
>
> Most people in the ancient world lived close to farming, even in cities. Everyone knew that a farmer could plant, water, and weed, but no farmer could make a seed sprout. Growth was something only God could give. Paul's

readers would have gotten the point instantly. Leaders are workers. God is the one who gives life.

So neither the planter nor the waterer is anything special. Only God, who makes things grow. They each have a job, and they'll each be rewarded for their work. "you are God's field, God's building."

Then Paul switches pictures, from a farm to a construction site. He laid the foundation of the church in Corinth like a skilled builder, and others are building on it. But "no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Everyone builds on that foundation with something: gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw. One day, the Day of judgment, each person's work will be tested by fire. Gold and silver survive fire. Hay and straw don't. If someone's work survives, they'll be rewarded. If it burns up, they'll suffer loss, but they themselves will be saved, like someone escaping through the flames.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fire in Corinth**

Paul's readers knew about fire. When the Romans destroyed the old Greek city of Corinth in 146 BC, much of it burned. Buildings made of wood and straw disappeared. Some stone structures, like the old temple of Apollo, survived. Its columns still stand in Corinth today.

Paul is talking mostly about leaders and teachers here, about whether their work in the church will last. But the principle applies to everyone. What are you building your life with? Things that will last, or things that will burn?

Then Paul asks a question he'll ask ten times in this letter: don't you know? "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" The "you" is plural. Paul isn't talking about individual bodies yet; he'll do that in chapter 6. Here,

he's saying the church, all of them together, is God's temple. Corinth was full of temples. But the place where God really lives is His people. And anyone who destroys God's temple, by tearing the church apart with division, is in serious trouble.

So stop bragging about human leaders. "All things are yours," Paul says, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future. You don't belong to them. They belong to you. "And you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

KEY VERSE

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

1 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says jealousy and quarreling show spiritual immaturity. Is that a surprising way to measure maturity? Why?
2. Who planted and watered seeds of faith in your life?
3. What are some things people build their lives with that won't survive the fire? What will?

TRY THIS *Pick one person who has helped your faith grow, and thank them this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Fools for Christ

1 Corinthians 4

The Corinthians had been judging their leaders like contestants on a talent show. Paul tells them how they should actually see leaders: "as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed."

The word Paul uses for those entrusted was often used for a household manager, usually a slave, who was put in charge of his master's property. And "it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." Not impressive. Not popular. Faithful.

So Paul says he doesn't care much about being judged by them, or by any human court. He doesn't even judge himself. "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." The only judge who matters is the Lord. So, Paul says, stop judging before the time. When the Lord comes, He'll bring to light what's hidden and reveal the motives of every heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rating the Preachers**

Social media didn't exist, but the Corinthians had their own version of rating and ranking. They compared speakers, praised some, criticized others, and attached their own status to the ones they liked. Paul refuses to play. He's not trying to win their approval. He's trying to be faithful to his Master.

Then Paul asks three questions that cut straight through pride. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Think about it. Your talents, your brain, your looks, your family, your opportunities, even your faith. Where did they come from? You received them. So bragging about them is like bragging about a gift someone else gave you.

Then Paul gets sarcastic. Really sarcastic. "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us!" The Corinthians acted as if they'd already arrived, as though they were spiritual royalty.

Then Paul describes what life is actually like for the apostles. God has put them on display at the end of the parade, like prisoners condemned to die in the arena. "We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong!" The apostles go hungry and thirsty. They wear rags. They get beaten. They're homeless. They work with their hands. When they're cursed, they bless. When they're persecuted, they endure. When they're slandered, they answer kindly. They've become "the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Arena Parade**
>
> When a Roman general won a great victory, he held a triumph, a huge parade through the city. At the very end came the captured prisoners, often on their way to be executed or to fight in the arena. Paul says that's where God put the apostles: last in line, a spectacle for the whole world to stare at. The Corinthians wanted to be at the front of the parade. Paul says following Jesus often puts you at the back.

Then Paul's tone softens. He's not writing to shame them, but to warn them "as my dear children." They may have ten thousand guardians, but they only have one father in the faith, and that's Paul, because he brought them the gospel. So he urges them to imitate him. He's sending Timothy, whom he calls his son, to remind them of how Paul lives.

Some of them are acting arrogant, as if Paul will never show up. He will, and soon. And then he'll find out whether these arrogant people have any real power, "for the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."

He ends with a question: Do you want me to come with a rod of discipline, or with love and a gentle spirit? It's up to them.

KEY VERSE

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

1 Corinthians 4:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being impressive and being faithful? Which one does our culture reward?
2. Read Paul's three questions in verse 7 again. Is there something you're tempted to brag about that you actually received?
3. Paul describes the apostles as fools for Christ. Have you ever felt foolish for following Jesus?

CHAPTER 5

A Little Yeast

1 Corinthians 5

Paul has spent four chapters on pride and division. Now he turns to something he's heard about that's even worse, and worse still, the church is proud of it.

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife."

This was probably his stepmother. Even Roman law and Roman culture, which were not exactly strict about sex, considered this shameful. And the church wasn't just ignoring it. "And you are proud!" Maybe they thought it showed how free they were, how far beyond old rules their grace had taken them.

Paul says they should have been grieving, not bragging. And they should remove this man from their fellowship.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Church Discipline**
>
> Paul tells the church to "hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." That sounds terrifying, and scholars debate exactly what it means. Most think it means putting him out of the church community, back into the world where Satan holds power, in the hope that he'll come to his senses. Notice the goal: so that he may be saved. Church discipline in the Bible is never about revenge or

shame for its own sake. It's about rescue. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul seems to urge the church to forgive and welcome back someone who has repented.

Then Paul uses a picture every Jewish reader would recognize. "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" Before Passover, Jewish families searched their homes and threw out every bit of yeast. Then they ate bread without yeast during the festival. Yeast, which spreads through dough, became a picture of sin, which spreads through a community.

So get rid of the old yeast, Paul says. "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." Just as the Passover lamb's blood protected Israel in Egypt, Jesus' death sets His people free. Now we live like the festival is always going on, not with the old yeast of malice and wickedness, but with "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Earlier Letter**

In verse 9, Paul mentions a letter he wrote them before this one. That letter is lost. Apparently he had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people, and they misunderstood. They thought he meant to avoid all such people everywhere, or maybe they used his words as an excuse to do nothing at all.

Paul clarifies. He didn't mean people outside the church. If you avoided everyone in the world who was immoral, greedy, or worshiped idols, you'd have to leave the planet. Jesus Himself ate with sinners, and Christians are supposed to be friends with people who don't follow Jesus.

What Paul meant was people inside the church who call themselves believers but keep living in open, unrepentant sin. "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" God will judge outsiders. The church should take care of its own house.

That's almost the opposite of how many Christians act. It's easy to be harsh with the world and soft on ourselves. Paul says: be gracious with outsiders and honest with insiders.

KEY VERSE

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

1 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Corinthian church was proud instead of grieving?
2. Paul says a little yeast spreads through the whole batch. How have you seen one person's attitude or sin affect a whole group?
3. Paul says don't judge outsiders, but do care about holiness inside the church. Why do Christians often get this backward?

CHAPTER 6

Bought at a Price

1 Corinthians 6

Next problem: Christians are suing each other in Roman courts.

"If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people?"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Courts in Corinth**
>
> Roman courts were not neutral places. Judges and juries often favored the wealthy and well connected. Lawsuits were usually filed by people of higher status against people below them, and the rich could hire skilled speakers to win. So when one believer sued another, it was often the powerful taking advantage of the weak, in public, for all of Corinth to see.

Paul is amazed. Don't you know that God's people will one day judge the world, even angels? And you can't settle small disputes among yourselves? Isn't anyone in your church wise enough to help? Then he goes further. "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

That's radical. Paul says it's better to be cheated than to drag a fellow believer through a public fight. Winning isn't everything. Love is.

Then Paul gives a list of people who "will not inherit the kingdom of God": the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, "men who have sex with men," thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hard List**

The NIV footnote explains that the words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts. Most Christians throughout history have understood this verse to mean that God's design for sex is between a husband and wife, and that sex outside that design is sin. Some Christians today read these words differently. Whatever your questions, don't miss two things. First, the list includes things like greed and slander, sins that are easy to excuse in ourselves. Second, look at the next verse.

"And that is what some of you were. 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."

That's one of the most hopeful sentences in the Bible. Were. Past tense. The church in Corinth was full of people who had done those things. Paul doesn't pretend otherwise. But they've been washed clean, set apart for God, and declared not guilty. No matter what someone has done, Jesus can make them new.

Then Paul answers some of the Corinthians' favorite slogans. "'I have the right to do anything,' you say." Some of them had decided that because they were saved by grace, nothing they did with their bodies mattered. Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food. Sex was just another appetite.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Corinthian Slogans**

The NIV puts quotation marks around phrases like I have the right to do anything because many scholars think Paul is quoting what the Corinthians

> were saying. Older translations say everything is permissible. Paul doesn't simply say no. He says: not everything is beneficial, and I will not be mastered by anything. Freedom that makes you a slave isn't freedom.

Paul says the body matters. God raised Jesus' body, and He will raise ours. Your body is part of Christ. So you can't take what belongs to Christ and unite it with a prostitute. (Prostitution was common in Corinth, and many men saw nothing wrong with it.) Sex isn't just physical. It joins two people. Scripture says, "The two will become one flesh."

"Flee from sexual immorality." Notice Paul doesn't say fight it, or argue with it, or see how close you can get. He says run. Like Joseph in Genesis, who ran from Potiphar's wife and left his coat behind.

Then comes another "don't you know." Earlier, Paul said the church together is God's temple. Now he says each believer's body is a temple too. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."

Bought at a price. That's slave-market language. Everyone in Corinth knew what it meant to be bought. Jesus paid for you with His own life. You belong to Him now, body and all.

KEY VERSE

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says it's better to be wronged than to win a fight against another believer. Is that hard for you? Why?
2. And that is what some of you were. Why is that sentence so important for people who feel like they've done too much wrong?
3. What does it mean in everyday life that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?

CHAPTER 7

Married or Single

1 Corinthians 7

With chapter 7, Paul starts answering the questions the Corinthians had sent him in their letter. “Now for the matters you wrote about.” And the first one is about sex and marriage.

The Corinthians seem to have had two opposite problems. Some, as we saw in chapter 6, thought sex didn’t matter, so anything goes. Others went the other way and thought sex was unspiritual, even inside marriage. They had a slogan: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Paul answers both. Because sexual immorality is a real danger, husbands and wives should have sexual relations with each other. And here’s something revolutionary for the ancient world. The wife doesn’t have authority over her own body; she yields it to her husband. “In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.” In a culture where husbands had most of the power, Paul says marriage is mutual. Each belongs to the other.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **A Mutual Marriage**
>
> In Roman society, a husband’s sexual unfaithfulness was often shrugged off, while a wife’s was punished severely. Paul uses the same words for husbands and wives over and over in this chapter. Husband to wife, wife to husband.

> The same obligations, the same faithfulness, the same respect. That was not how most people in Corinth thought.

Then Paul says something that surprises some people. "I wish that all of you were as I am," meaning single. Paul wasn't married, at least at this point in his life, and he found that singleness let him serve God without distraction. But he immediately adds that each person has their own gift from God. Marriage is a gift. Singleness is a gift. Neither one is second-class.

That's worth hearing in a culture that sometimes acts like you're incomplete without a boyfriend or girlfriend, or in churches that act as if marriage is the only goal. Jesus was single. Paul was single. Being single isn't waiting for life to start.

Paul also gives honest, practical advice. If unmarried people can't control their desires, they should marry, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Divorce**
>
> Paul passes on Jesus' own teaching: married couples should not separate or divorce. If they do separate, they should stay unmarried or be reconciled. Then Paul addresses a situation Jesus didn't directly address: a believer married to an unbeliever. If the unbelieving spouse is willing to stay, the believer shouldn't leave. If the unbeliever leaves, the believer is "not bound in such circumstances." Christians differ on exactly what that allows, especially whether it permits remarriage, and on how Paul's words apply to situations like abuse. These are questions to work through with wise, caring pastors, not alone.

Then Paul gives a general principle. In whatever situation you were in when God called you, live for Him there. If you were circumcised, don't try to undo it. If you weren't, don't get circumcised. If you were a slave, don't let it trouble you, though if

you can gain your freedom, do it. "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings." Your identity isn't your status, your relationship, or your situation. It's that you belong to the Lord.

Paul gives his advice about engaged couples and unmarried people, and he's careful to say when he's giving a command from the Lord and when he's giving his own judgment. Because of "the present crisis," he thinks it's better for people to stay as they are. We don't know exactly what crisis he meant; it may have been a famine or persecution, or Paul may mean the short time before Jesus returns. But he also says clearly, "if you do marry, you have not sinned."

His real goal is that they would live "in undivided devotion to the Lord." Whether married or single, the question is the same: is Jesus first?

KEY VERSE

I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:35 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Our culture often treats being single as a problem to solve. How does Paul see it differently?
2. Why do you think Paul's teaching that husbands and wives belong to each other equally was so surprising in his day?
3. Paul says to serve God in whatever situation you're in. What situation are you in right now, and how could you serve God there?

CHAPTER 8

Knowledge and Love

1 Corinthians 8

Next question on the list: "Now about food sacrificed to idols."

That probably doesn't sound like your biggest issue. But in Corinth, it was huge. Almost all meat came through the temples. Animals were sacrificed to a god, part was burned, and the rest was eaten at temple banquets or sold in the market. Birthday parties, weddings, business dinners, and club meetings were often held in temple dining rooms. If you were a Christian in Corinth, the question of idol food touched your job, your friendships, and your family.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Temple Dining Rooms**
>
> Archaeologists have found dining rooms at the temple of Asclepius in Corinth, the god of healing. Invitations from the ancient world have been found that say things like, come dine at the table of the lord Serapis. For many people, eating in a temple was as normal as going to a restaurant. For new believers who had once worshiped those gods, it could pull them right back into their old life.

Some of the Corinthians had a slogan here too: "We all possess knowledge." They knew that idols weren't real gods. "An idol is nothing at all in the world." "There is no God but one." So, they reasoned, eating idol food doesn't matter. We're too smart to be bothered by it.

Paul agrees with their theology. He even gives one of the clearest statements of faith in the New Testament: for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came. That's remarkable. Paul takes the most basic statement of Jewish faith, that God is one, and includes Jesus inside it.

But then Paul says something that cuts through their pride. "But knowledge puffs up while love builds up."

Knowing the right answer isn't enough. Knowledge can make you proud, like a balloon. Love builds people up, like a building. And not everyone has the same knowledge. Some believers had worshiped idols for years. If they ate temple food, it felt to them like worshiping the god again, and their conscience was hurt.

So Paul warns the "strong" believers. Be careful that your freedom doesn't become a stumbling block to the weak. If a weaker believer sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, they might be encouraged to do the same thing, even though they believe it's wrong. "So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **For Whom Christ Died**
>
> Notice how Paul describes the weaker believer: someone for whom Christ died. That changes everything. If Jesus thought this person was worth dying for, you can give up a meal for them. When you sin against them, Paul says, you sin against Christ.

Then Paul makes it personal. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."

That's the question Paul wants every believer to ask. Not just, am I allowed to do this? But, will this help or hurt the people around me?

KEY VERSE

But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.

1 Corinthians 8:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Can you think of a time when being right made someone proud or unkind? Has that ever been you?
2. What are some modern situations where something might be okay for one Christian but a stumbling block for another?
3. How does remembering that Christ died for someone change the way you treat them?

CHAPTER 9

Run to Win

1 Corinthians 9

At the end of chapter 8, Paul said he would give up eating meat rather than make a fellow believer stumble. In chapter 9, he shows that he really lives that way. He uses his own life as an example of giving up rights for the sake of others.

He starts with a string of questions. “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Some people in Corinth were questioning whether Paul was a real apostle. He points out that the church itself is the proof. “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”

Then Paul lists his rights. He has the right to food and drink, paid for by the churches. He has the right to bring a believing wife along on his travels, like the other apostles and Jesus’ brothers and Peter do. He has the right to be paid for preaching. Soldiers get paid. Farmers eat from their vineyards. Shepherds drink the milk of their flocks. Even the law of Moses says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” And Jesus Himself commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living from it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Making Tents**
>
> Instead of taking money from the Corinthians, Paul worked with his hands. Acts 18 says he made tents with Aquila and Priscilla. Leatherworking was

hard, dirty, low-status work. Wealthy Corinthians who were used to hiring teachers and philosophers may have looked down on a teacher who worked a manual job. But Paul didn't want anyone to think he was preaching for profit.

"But I have not used any of these rights." Paul would rather die than let anyone take away his boast that he preaches for free. He isn't preaching to get rich. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" He has to. It's what God called him to do.

Then comes a famous passage about Paul's strategy. "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." With Jews, he lived like a Jew. With Gentiles, he lived like a Gentile, though always under Christ's law. With the weak, he became weak. "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."

That doesn't mean Paul changed the message to please people. The gospel stayed the same. What changed was everything else: his food, his habits, his style, his comfort. He was willing to adjust anything about himself that might keep people from hearing about Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Isthmian Games**

Every two years, crowds came to Corinth for the Isthmian Games. Athletes trained for months under strict rules. Runners, wrestlers, and boxers competed for a crown made of pine or wild celery, which would be dead within weeks. Paul probably saw the games. His readers definitely had.

So Paul uses an athletic picture they'd understand. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." Athletes go into strict training for a crown that won't last. We train "to get a crown that will last forever."

Paul isn't saying Christians are competing against each other. He's saying the Christian life takes focus, effort, and discipline. He doesn't run aimlessly. He doesn't box like someone swinging at the air. He disciplines his body like an athlete, so that after preaching to others, he himself won't be disqualified.

Grace isn't lazy. Being saved by grace doesn't mean you coast. It means you run, because you already know the prize is yours.

KEY VERSE

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul gave up rights he really had. What rights or preferences might God be asking you to give up for someone else's good?
2. What's the difference between changing yourself to reach people and changing the message to please them?
3. Athletes train hard for a prize that doesn't last. What would spiritual training look like in your life?

TRY THIS *Choose one spiritual habit, like reading a chapter of the Bible or praying for five minutes, and do it every day this week, like training for a race.*

CHAPTER 10

A Way Out

1 Corinthians 10

Chapter 9 ended with a warning: even Paul could be disqualified. In chapter 10, he explains why the warning is real, using Israel's history.

The Israelites who left Egypt had amazing spiritual experiences. They all passed under the cloud of God's presence. They all walked through the Red Sea. They all ate the manna God sent from heaven and drank water from the rock. Paul says "that rock was Christ," meaning that Christ was with His people even then.

"Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness." They had every spiritual privilege, and they still fell, through idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Experiences**
>
> The Corinthians had amazing gifts and powerful spiritual experiences. They had been baptized and shared the Lord's Supper. Some of them seemed to think that made them safe no matter how they lived. Paul says Israel had the same kind of experiences, and many of them still turned away. Spiritual experiences are wonderful, but they're not a substitute for faithfulness.

These things happened as examples, Paul says, and were written down as warnings for us. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

And then, right after the warning, one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

Three promises. First, you're not alone. Whatever temptation you face, other people have faced it too. Second, God is faithful. He knows your limits. Third, there's always a way out. Sometimes the way out is literally walking out of a room. Sometimes it's turning off a screen, calling a friend, or saying a quick prayer. But it's there.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Testing or Temptation?**
>
> The NIV footnote says the Greek words for temptation and tempted can also mean testing and tested. The same word covers both. A hard situation can be a temptation to sin and a test of faith at the same time. Either way, the promise holds. God is faithful, and He provides a way through.

"Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry." There's that word flee again, the same thing Paul said about sexual immorality. Some temptations you don't negotiate with. You run.

Then Paul returns to the question of idol food. When believers share the cup and bread of the Lord's Supper, they share in Christ. When pagans eat sacrifices in a temple, they're taking part in something real too. The idol is nothing, but there are demons behind idol worship. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too." So Christians shouldn't join in temple feasts.

But what about meat sold in the market, or dinner at an unbelieving friend's house? Paul is practical. Eat whatever is sold in the market. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If an unbeliever invites you to dinner, go and eat what's served without asking questions. But if someone points out that the food was offered to an idol, don't eat it, for the sake of that person's conscience.

Then Paul sums up the whole discussion. "I have the right to do anything," the Corinthians said. Paul answers that "not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."

And then he gives a principle big enough to cover your whole life. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Lunch. Homework. Practice. Gaming. Texting. Whatever you do.

KEY VERSE

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why is it dangerous to think you're standing firm?
2. What does the way out look like for the temptations you face most often?
3. What would it mean to do something ordinary, like eating lunch or playing a game, for the glory of God?

CHAPTER 11

Head Coverings and a Broken Supper

1 Corinthians 11

Chapter 11 deals with two problems in Corinthian worship. The first is one of the hardest passages in the New Testament to understand. The second is easier to understand and harder to hear.

Paul starts with praise. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” He’s glad they hold on to the traditions he passed on. But there’s an issue about how men and women are dressed when they pray and prophesy in worship.

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.” Paul talks about headship, about creation, about hair, and even mentions the angels.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was Going On?**

Scholars have filled whole books with this passage, and Christians apply it in different ways. In Roman culture, a married woman normally covered her head in public, and appearing with her hair uncovered or loose could signal that she was available or disrespectful to her husband. Some think Paul is telling women not to send that kind of message in worship. Others think the issue was hair styles; the NIV footnote gives an alternative translation about long hair rather than a cloth covering. Some churches today practice head

coverings. Many others believe the principle, honoring God and each other by what we wear in worship, matters more than the specific custom. Most agree that Paul assumes women pray and prophesy out loud in worship, and that he wants worship to honor God, not draw attention to ourselves.

Paul also talks about the relationship between men and women. He says "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Christians understand headship differently; some see it as a kind of authority and leadership in marriage and church, and others emphasize the meaning of source or origin. But Paul quickly balances his words: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman." Woman came from man in creation, but every man is born of a woman. "But everything comes from God."

The second problem is the Lord's Supper. In the early church, it wasn't a small cup and wafer. It was part of a real meal that the church shared in someone's home.

And it was going badly. "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." Some people went ahead and ate their own food before others arrived. "As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dinner in a Roman House**

A wealthy Roman home had a dining room that might hold nine to twelve people reclining on couches, and a larger open courtyard. At a church meal, the host's wealthy friends may have eaten the best food in the dining room, while poorer members, including slaves who worked late and couldn't arrive early, crowded into the courtyard with leftovers or nothing at all. That's how Roman dinner parties normally worked. The rich got the best. Paul says that in the church it's a disgrace.

Paul is furious. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Do you despise God's church by humiliating the poor? "What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!"

Then Paul reminds them what the Lord's Supper actually is, and his words are some of the earliest written records of what Jesus said at the Last Supper. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." Then He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The Lord's Supper is a sermon you can taste. It tells the story of Jesus' death for us. And a meal that tells that story can't be one where the rich ignore the poor.

So Paul warns them to examine themselves before they eat. Those who eat "without discerning the body of Christ" bring judgment on themselves. Christians understand that phrase in different ways, but in context it includes recognizing the church, the body of Christ sitting around the table, including its poorest members.

His practical solution is simple. When you come together to eat, wait for each other.

KEY VERSE

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul wanted worship that honored God and didn't draw attention to ourselves. What might that look like today?
2. The rich Corinthians ignored the poor at the Lord's Supper. Where do you see people left out at church or youth group?
3. What does it mean to you that communion proclaims Jesus' death until He comes?

CHAPTER 12

One Body, Many Parts

1 Corinthians 12

Next question: “Now about the gifts of the Spirit.”

The Corinthians loved spiritual gifts, especially the flashy ones, like speaking in tongues. They seem to have ranked people by their gifts. If you had an impressive one, you were a spiritual superstar. If you didn’t, you were second-class.

Paul starts by reminding them where they came from. Before they knew Jesus, they were led astray by mute idols. Now they have the Spirit. And here’s the basic test of whether someone is speaking by the Spirit: “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit always points to Jesus.

Then Paul lays out a basic truth: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.” Different kinds of service, same Lord. Different kinds of working, same God. Notice Paul mentions the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and God the Father together. All three are at work in the church.

And then: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Each one. Every believer has a gift. And it’s given for others, not for showing off.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Gifts**

Paul lists some gifts here: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and interpreting tongues. Other lists in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4 include serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. None of the lists seems meant to be complete. Christians disagree about whether some gifts, especially tongues, prophecy, and healing, continue today in the same way as in the early church. Some believe they do; others believe they ended with the apostles. Both sides agree with Paul's main point: gifts are given by the Spirit, for the good of others.

Then Paul gives a picture: the body. A body has many parts, but it's one body. "So it is with Christ." Every believer, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, was baptized by one Spirit into one body.

Then Paul gets almost comical. Imagine if the foot said, because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body. Or the ear said, I'm not an eye, so I'm not part of this. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" Imagine a giant eyeball rolling around. It can see beautifully, but it can't hear, smell, walk, or pick anything up.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clay Body Parts**

At the temple of Asclepius in Corinth, the god of healing, archaeologists found many clay models of body parts: hands, feet, eyes, ears, legs. Sick people left them as offerings, either to ask for healing or to give thanks for it. The Corinthians walked past these broken, separate body parts. Paul gives them a different picture: a body made whole, every part connected, in Christ.

Some people think they don't matter. That's the foot saying, I'm not a hand. Others think they don't need anyone. That's the eye saying to the hand, "I don't need you!" Paul answers both. Every part belongs. Every part is needed. In fact, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." God designed the body so

that its parts would care for each other. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

You are not a spectator in the church. You’re not an audience member. You’re a part of the body. And the body is missing something without you.

Paul ends with questions that expect no for an answer. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Do all speak in tongues? No. God gives different gifts to different people.

Then, at the very end of the chapter, Paul says something that sets up the most famous chapter he ever wrote. “And yet I will show you the most excellent way.”

KEY VERSE

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever felt like the foot, thinking you don’t really belong in the church? Or like the eye, thinking you don’t need others?
2. What gifts do you see in the people around you? What gift might God have given you?
3. If one part suffers, every part suffers. Who in your church or youth group is suffering right now? How could you suffer with them?

CHAPTER 13

The Most Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13

You've probably heard this chapter before. It's read at weddings all the time. But Paul didn't write it for a wedding. He wrote it for a church that was fighting, bragging, suing each other, and showing off their spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 sits right in the middle of Paul's discussion of gifts on purpose. It's the most excellent way to use them.

Paul starts by imagining the most impressive spiritual person possible. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Gongs and Cymbals**
>
> Corinth was famous for its bronze. Bronze gongs and cymbals were used in pagan worship, especially in loud, wild ceremonies for certain gods. Some scholars think Paul is also thinking of large bronze sound vessels used in ancient theaters to make sound carry. Either way, the picture is the same: lots of noise, no meaning. Without love, even speaking in angelic languages is just noise.

Paul keeps going. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand every mystery and have all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but don't have love, "I am nothing." If I give away everything I own to the poor and give my body to hardship, but don't have love, "I gain nothing."

That's a shocking list. Paul is saying that the best gifts, the deepest knowledge, the strongest faith, and the most extreme sacrifice are worth zero without love.

Then he describes what love is like. And he does it with verbs. Love isn't just a feeling. It's what you do.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Portrait of Jesus**
>
> Read the description of love again, but put the name Jesus where it says love. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus doesn't boast. Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. It fits perfectly, because Jesus is what love looks like. Now try putting your own name there. That's harder. Most of us don't fit very well yet. That's the point. Love isn't something you work up; it's something the Spirit grows in you as you become more like Jesus.

Notice how many items on the list match the Corinthians' problems. They were envious of each other's gifts. They boasted. They were proud. They dishonored the poor at the Lord's Supper. They were self-seeking. They kept records of wrongs and took each other to court. Paul isn't just writing poetry. He's holding up a mirror.

"Love never fails." Everything else will end. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are for now. "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When Completeness Comes**
>
> Christians disagree about what Paul means by completeness. Most understand it as the return of Jesus, when we will see Him face to face and know fully. Some think Paul means the completion of the New Testament,

> and they believe gifts like tongues and prophecy ended after that. Either way, Paul's point is clear: gifts are temporary, but love lasts forever.

Paul compares it to growing up. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me." The Corinthians were acting like spiritual kids, showing off their gifts like toys. Paul wants them to grow up.

And then he says we only see part of the picture now. "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." Ancient mirrors were made of polished bronze, often from Corinth. You could see yourself, but the image was dim and blurry. That's what knowing God is like now. One day we'll see Him clearly, face to face. "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

God already knows you completely. Every thought, every failure, every secret. And He loves you anyway.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

KEY VERSE

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 Corinthians 13:4–7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul put this chapter in the middle of his teaching about spiritual gifts?
2. Put your own name in place of love in verses 4 to 7. Which line is hardest to say honestly?
3. Why is love greater than faith and hope?

TRY THIS *Pick one line from verses 4 to 7 and practice it on purpose with one person every day this week.*

CHAPTER 14

Five Words

1 Corinthians 14

Paul has shown them the most excellent way. Now he applies it to worship. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy."

Why prophecy? Because of love. The Corinthians were especially excited about speaking in tongues, but in church, tongues without interpretation don't help anyone else. "Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tongues and Prophecy**
>
> In Acts 2, believers spoke in real human languages they had never learned. In 1 Corinthians, speaking in tongues seems to be prayer or praise in a language the speaker doesn't understand; Paul says the speaker talks to God, not people, and no one understands without an interpretation. Prophecy, in Paul's letters, means speaking a message from God that strengthens, encourages, and comforts others. Christians today disagree about whether and how these gifts continue. Some churches practice them; others believe they have ceased; many are somewhere in between. Paul's concern in this chapter is clear in any case: in public worship, choose what builds others up.

Paul isn't against tongues. He says he'd like all of them to speak in tongues, and he thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than all

of them. “But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

He uses musical examples. If a flute or harp plays random notes, no one recognizes the song. If the trumpet doesn’t sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? Speaking words no one understands is like “speaking into the air.”

So Paul gives a principle. “Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.” He’ll pray with his spirit, but also with his mind. If someone can’t understand what you’re saying, how can they say “Amen” to it?

Then Paul thinks about visitors. If an unbeliever walks into a church where everyone is speaking in tongues at once, they’ll think the people are out of their minds. But if they hear prophecy, they’ll understand, their hearts will be laid bare, and they’ll fall down and worship, saying, “God is really among you!”

Then Paul gives practical rules for worship. Everyone brings something: a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” Two or three people at most should speak in tongues, one at a time, with interpretation. If no one can interpret, they should stay quiet. Two or three prophets should speak, and others should carefully weigh what they say. If someone else has something to share, the first speaker should stop. “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Women Silent in the Churches?**

Verses 34 and 35 say women should remain silent in the churches and ask their husbands at home if they want to learn. These verses are among the most debated in the Bible. Some facts help. In chapter 11, Paul assumed women would pray and prophesy aloud in worship, so he can’t mean total

> silence at all times. The NIV footnote also notes that in a few manuscripts these verses come after verse 40, and a minority of scholars think they may have been added later, though they appear in every surviving manuscript of the letter. Many scholars think Paul is addressing a specific problem, such as disruptive questions during worship or the weighing of prophecies. Others believe he is setting a lasting pattern for who leads and teaches in church. Churches today practice this in different ways. It's an important passage to discuss with your pastor or youth leader, carefully and respectfully.

Paul ends with a summary. Be eager to prophesy. Don't forbid speaking in tongues. "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

That's a good word for churches on all sides of the gifts debate. Don't shut down what the Spirit is doing. Don't let worship become chaos. Do everything with love, so that people are built up and visitors meet God.

KEY VERSE

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

1 Corinthians 14:40 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul would rather speak five words people understand than ten thousand they don't. What does that mean for how we talk about faith?
2. If someone who didn't know Jesus came to your church or youth group, what would they experience? Would they understand what's going on?
3. What could you bring to worship, like a song, a prayer, a word of encouragement, that would build others up?

CHAPTER 15

Death Loses

1 Corinthians 15

Paul saves the most important topic for last. Some people in Corinth were saying there's no resurrection of the dead. Many Greeks thought the body was a prison, and the goal was for the soul to escape it. A body coming back to life sounded ridiculous, even disgusting.

Paul starts with the basics. He reminds them of the gospel he preached to them, the message that saves them. And he passes on what he calls "of first importance": "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Oldest Creed**
>
> Most scholars believe verses 3 to 7 are a summary of the faith that Paul received from the earliest Christians, possibly within a few years of Jesus' death. Paul says he received it and passed it on, the language Jewish teachers used for carefully handing down tradition. That means the belief that Jesus rose from the dead wasn't a legend that grew over centuries. It was there from the very beginning.

Then Paul lists witnesses. Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to more than five hundred believers at once, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote. In other words, go ask them. Then to James, Jesus' brother, who hadn't believed in Him

before. Then to all the apostles. "And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

Paul calls himself the least of the apostles, because he persecuted the church. "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

Then Paul makes his argument. If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." The apostles would be liars. The Corinthians would still be in their sins. Believers who have died would be lost. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

That's honest. Paul doesn't say Christianity is a nice way to live whether or not it's true. He says everything depends on whether Jesus actually rose from the dead.

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Firstfruits**
>
> At harvest time, Israelites brought the first part of their crop to God as an offering. It was called the firstfruits. It was a promise that the rest of the harvest was coming. Paul says Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits. He's the first one raised, never to die again. The rest of the harvest, everyone who belongs to Him, is coming.

Just as death came through one man, Adam, the resurrection comes through one man, Jesus. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Jesus will reign until He has defeated every enemy. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Baptized for the Dead?**
>
> In verse 29, Paul mentions people being baptized for the dead. No one knows for sure what he meant, and scholars have suggested dozens of explanations.

> Paul doesn't say he approves of it. He simply points out that the practice makes no sense if the dead aren't raised. It's a good reminder that we don't have to understand every verse to understand the main point.

Paul also points to his own life. Why would he face death every day if there were no resurrection? If the dead aren't raised, then "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Then he quotes a Greek poet, Menander: "Bad company corrupts good character." Some of the Corinthians had been listening to the wrong voices.

Then someone asks, how are the dead raised? What kind of body will they have? Paul answers with a seed. When you plant a seed, it doesn't come up looking like a seed. It dies in the ground and comes up as a plant. The resurrection body will be connected to our present body, but gloriously different. "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."

And it will happen fast. "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."

Then Paul quotes the prophets and taunts death itself. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Death's sting is sin, and the law gives sin its power. "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The chapter ends with a practical conclusion. Because the resurrection is real, "stand firm. Let nothing move you." Give yourself fully to the Lord's work, because "your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Nothing you do for Jesus is wasted. Not a single prayer, kind word, or act of service. The resurrection guarantees it.

KEY VERSE

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

1 Corinthians 15:55 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says if Christ hasn't been raised, our faith is useless. Why does the resurrection matter so much?
2. Paul pointed to witnesses who were still alive. Why is that important evidence?
3. How does knowing that your work for the Lord isn't in vain change the way you think about ordinary acts of kindness?

CHAPTER 16

Do Everything in Love

1 Corinthians 16

After the heights of chapter 15, Paul comes back down to earth. "Now about the collection for the Lord's people."

Paul was collecting money from Gentile churches to help poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. It's the same collection he mentions in Romans 15. Here he gives practical instructions. "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income." Regular. Planned. In proportion to what you have.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The First Day of the Week**
>
> This verse is one of the earliest signs that Christians gathered on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Jewish believers had kept the Sabbath on Saturday. Over time, Sunday became known as the Lord's Day. Paul's instruction about setting money aside each Sunday suggests that this was already a regular rhythm for the church.

Paul shares his travel plans. He's staying in Ephesus until Pentecost, "because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Notice those two things together. Great opportunity and great opposition often come at the same time.

He asks them to treat Timothy well when he comes. Timothy was young, and some people might look down on him. “See to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you.” He mentions Apollos too. Paul had urged him to visit Corinth, but Apollos didn’t want to go yet. Remember the fan clubs in chapter 1? Paul and Apollos weren’t rivals. They were co-workers, and Paul speaks of him warmly.

Then Paul gives a short, punchy list of commands, almost like a coach in a huddle. “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.”

Read those as a summary of the whole letter. Be on your guard against the pride and immorality of Corinth. Stand firm in the faith, especially the resurrection. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything, all of it, in love. Not just the gifts. Not just worship. Everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **In His Own Hand**
>
> Paul usually dictated his letters to a scribe. At the end, he often picked up the pen himself to write a final greeting, partly to show the letter was really from him. “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.” Picture the Corinthians looking at the scroll and seeing his handwriting change at the bottom.

Paul praises the household of Stephanas, the first converts in the region, who have devoted themselves to serving God’s people. He thanks Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus for visiting him. Aquila and Priscilla send greetings, along with the church that meets in their house, the same couple who had worked with Paul in Corinth years before.

Then Paul writes a strong line: if anyone doesn’t love the Lord, let them be cursed. And right after it, an Aramaic prayer: “Come, Lord!”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Maranatha**

The NIV footnote says the words Come, Lord translate an Aramaic expression, Marana tha, used by early Christians. Aramaic was the language Jesus and His first followers spoke. Paul is writing in Greek to a mostly Greek-speaking church, and he still uses this Aramaic prayer, which suggests it was a prayer the whole church knew, from Jerusalem to Corinth. It's one of the oldest Christian prayers we have.

The letter ends with grace, the same word it started with. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." And then one last line that's very Paul. After all the correction, the sarcasm, the warnings, and the hard words, he signs off: "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen."

That's how the letter ends. Not with a scolding. With love.

KEY VERSE

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.

1 Corinthians 16:13–14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says great opportunity and great opposition often come together. Have you ever experienced that?
2. Paul wanted the church to treat young Timothy with respect. How can you show that people your age can be trusted to serve God?
3. Paul ended a hard letter with love. How can you be honest with someone and still make sure they know you love them?

TRY THIS *Memorize 1 Corinthians 16:13–14 this week, and say it to yourself every morning before school.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's whole first letter to the Corinthians. Every problem Paul dealt with, from cliques to lawsuits to chaos in worship, he brought back to the same message. He called it the message of the cross, and he said it was of first importance.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you to know Him.

The world, with all its wisdom, didn't find God on its own. So God came looking for us. You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Paul's list of sins in chapter 6 is long, and he says of the Corinthians, that is what some of you were. The same is true for every one of us. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus paid it, and He's alive.

This is the message Paul says is of first importance. Jesus died for our sins, He was buried, and He rose again. If He hadn't risen, Paul says, our faith would be useless. But He did.

> *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,* **1 Corinthians 15:3–4 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The Corinthians loved to boast. Paul kept asking them, what do you have that you didn't receive? Salvation isn't something you achieve. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. The Corinthians failed plenty. It means you belong to Him now. You were bought at a price.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for my sins, was buried, and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. I'm not my own anymore; I belong to You. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and teach me to love the way You love. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Corinthians straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read 2 Corinthians, where you'll find out what happened next.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. It won't be perfect. Neither was Corinth. You're part of the body, and the body needs you. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest. When you're tempted, ask Him for the way out He promised. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Some of the Corinthians had serious doubts about the resurrection, and Paul didn't kick them out. He gave them evidence and reasons. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Jesus really rose from the dead, then death doesn't get the last word, and nothing you do for Him is ever wasted. That's worth finding out for yourself.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57 (NIV)