“An Overview of 1 Corinthians” Sermon Manuscript

Series Title: 1 Corinthians: “Loving Christ Over the World”

Today, we are embarking on a new book of the Bible, 1 Corinthians. I hope Lord willing when we finish 1 Corinthians, we can also go through 2 Corinthians as well, but we shall see…perhaps we might take a break from Corinthians to go through a shorter series so that we can return later to 2 Corinthians. Now the previous book we went through was the book of Romans. And of course like all of the other letters that the apostle Paul wrote, he wrote to a specific church or specific churches in that region so that he could help and address certain issues the church was struggling in. For the book of Romans, the church at Rome was primarily dealing with Jewish and Gentile relationships in the church and Paul took the church at Rome back to the gospel, and the implications of the gospel, because the gospel is the cure to all the practical issues of disunity they were experiencing between Jew and Gentile. But compared to other churches, the church at Rome was not the worst in how they lived out their lives. Sure, there was some struggles, but for the most part they were actually doing well compared to the other churches Paul wrote to.

But when it comes to the church at Corinth, the Corinthian church, they were not doing well. Compared to the church at Rome, you can argue that the church at Corinth were at the bottom morally speaking. They were a church that was heavily influenced by the sinful and sexually immoral culture surrounding them. Instead of being a holy and purifying influence on the world, they were being influenced by the world for corruption and impurity. Thus there are many things the church today can relate to as Paul is going to cover many relevant topics in the Christian life and in church life. Paul went to Corinth in Acts 18 where he stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, founding the church of Corinth there, which is considerably longer than most places he went to. That was in part due to the fact that Corinth was a major economic hub of commerce and trade. It was a popular destination for entertainment as it hosted the bi-annual Isthmian games, second only to the Olympic games. But Corinth also attracted those who were seeking immoral pleasures as well as there were tons of temple prostitutes and idols, working for/worshipping the goddess of love Aphrodite.

So that city needed the light of the gospel to purify the culture and to give the hope of the gospel to all those passing by. After establishing the church in Corinth, and after he left to go on to his other missionary destinations, things did not go well at the church of Corinth as he received reports from numerous brothers and sisters in the Lord that the church at Corinth were facing some serious issues; moral issues and issues of division and disunity. And so in response, Paul sends a letter to the church at Corinth presumably rebuking their deviation from gospel living and explaining why they shouldn’t do the things they are doing. But Paul’s letter was met with confusion as many in the church at Corinth were either misunderstanding what he was saying or trying to rebuttal back in justifying their own sinful behaviors. And so, Paul’s reply letter back to their reply back to his first letter of initial correction is what we have here in our laps, the letter of 1 Corinthians.

And so Paul’s aim in this letter is to answer the many questions they had about various subjects of the Christian life and of how to do church as well as redirecting them back to the love of Jesus displayed on the cross because they were frankly in love with the world. They were not loving Jesus as they should have, because if they were loving Jesus properly, they wouldn’t be having these serious issues. So like all the other overviews I have done, I want you to see the “big picture,” “forest for the trees” overview today as we fly over from a 30,000 foot perspective overview of the first letter to the Corinthians. I’m hoping that as you view 1 Corinthians through a zoomed-out lens, you will see that Paul connects the issues that the Corinthians had back to a lack of love for the gospel, a lack of love for God, as well as a lack of a heavenly perspective. Throughout the letter you will see various questions and misunderstandings that the Corinthian believers had objected about in the previous exchanges that Paul had with them.

In terms of the actual structure of the letter, you will see that chapters 1-4 is about divisions and partiality after certain leaders in the church. Chapters 5-7 addresses the sexual immorality going on in the church and how the church should think about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and singleness. Chapters 8-10 is about the conscience and Christian liberty and the problem the Corinthians were having of licentiousness. Chapters 11-14 is about how a church should order itself when it comes to gender roles, communion, and how to use spiritual gifts in the church. Then in chapter 15, Paul speaks about the significance of the resurrection of Christ to not only counter the thinking and acting of the Corinthian believers in regard to the resurrection of the dead, but also to show why the resurrection empowers and enables believers to live a righteous, holy, and heaven-oriented life as opposed to a sinful, worldly, earthly-oriented life. Then finally chapter 16 answers one final practical question they had about collecting money to give to the church in Jerusalem, as well as gives some final practical and theological charges.

So let’s begin with chapter 1: Paul does his usual greeting that you find typically in a Roman letter, where basically you have the author, the recipient and some form a greeting or blessing to the recipient. But even in these greetings, you can glean a lot from the word choices he uses. Notice in 1:2, he says, “*to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus*,” and “*called as saints*.” He doesn’t emphases their justification, he doesn’t say, to those who have been justified in Christ Jesus, but rather to those who have been “sanctified” meaning Paul is emphasizing their sanctification, how they act and think in light of their justification in Christ…how holy they are living, because the main issue we are dealing with is the Corinthian believers’ sanctification. Then skip down to verse 10, Paul exhorts the brothers to unity because there is division among them. What kind of division? Well look with me in verse 10 “*Now I exhort you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.”*

After Paul left the church at Corinth, there were other leaders or you can say guest preachers that came to the church to visit them and build them up in the Lord. Presumably Apollos, Cephas (or Peter), and others. But in our sinful human flesh, we have a tendency to take pride in and boast in certain leaders we like. We have a tendency to create a following just like this church 2000 years ago did, because we all the same human nature. And in that culture of Corinth, it was not only a commercial center of trading and commerce, not only was it a cesspool of immorality, it was also a place known for its high regard for eloquence in speech and rhetoric and debate. The culture placed a premium and respect for well and persuasive someone can be rather than focusing on the content in which that person was speaking of. The truth could be twisted, manipulated and even false, but as long as it was eloquently persuasive, the Corinthian culture loved that. But that is rebuked and put in its place by Paul mentioning the cross of Christ, essentially taking them back to the gospel, that the foolishness of the gospel destroys the so called wisdom of this age, what men consider as “wise.” The cross should make us boast not in men or in how eloquent a man could speak, but in the Lord and His salvation alone. And it doesn’t mean that the preaching of the cross is without power and persuasion…so in chapter 2 Paul says that the power and persuasion of preaching Christ comes from the Holy Spirit, so one’s faith would not rest in men but in God. 2:3-5 “*And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my word and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*”

Chapters 3 and 4 is about making sure we understand that Jesus is the foundation for everything and that if we build on a foundation other than Christ, our works will be burnt up. And as the foundation for ministry, we must understand that apostles, prophets, teachers, preachers, etc. are all subservient to that one foundation. Then we come to the next section, chapters 5-7 which speaks on the sexual immorality in the church, and how the Corinthian church should think about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and singleness. Chapter 5 starts off with a shocking statement that Paul knows of a man who is having immoral relations with his step mother. Look at 5:1-2 “*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. And you have become puffed up and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.*” Instead of repenting and mourning over the sin, the Corinthian believers didn’t find it particularly wrong or sinful but were boasting about it. And so Paul calls for immediate church discipline of this man, to remove him from their midst.

But it’s not only that, chapter 6 introduces us to another problem they were having where the believers in Corinth were suing each other and taking each other to court. Some maybe were doing it to receive compensation for a genuine loss they received from another, but others were taking other believers to court to take advantage of them. Paul concludes that section with a shocking statement that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God…the Corinthians might have thought “big deal if one of us takes another to court…doesn’t he need to be compensated?” But Paul sees a deeper issue here that these actions are steming from fleshly and worldly motivations, which leads to him saying in verse 18 of chapter 6 “*Flee sexual immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral man sins against his own body*.” And because of the heavy negative commands that Paul gave previously to the Corinthian church, presumably, they answered back saying well if sexual sin is so bad and it’s so easy to sin sexually with a woman, then they concluded, “*it’s good for a man not to touch a woman*.” They swung from one extreme, licentiousness to another, a very legalistic outlook concerning sex and marriage. So, in chapter 7, Paul addresses the topic of marriage, divorce, remarriage, and singleness, and what to do in each scenario.

That leads into the third category or section of chapters, chapters 8-10 on Christian liberty and in matters of the conscience. Like the church at Rome, the Corinthian church struggled with how to approach meat sacrificed to idols because one group thought it was fine and another thought it was not fine to eat. And the underlying principle is love. Our love for each other should dictate how we should approach our “rights” or “freedoms” that we have as believers. If our “freedom” causes another to stumble, then we are no longer acting in love, and we should not use our freedom in front of a weaker brother. The Corinthian church was known for their licentiousness, or living without a law or a limit, they thought they were free to do anything they wanted. Those who thought so were usually the ones who didn’t care if eating meat sacrificed to idols would offend another brothers. But as a warning against that type of licentious thinking and living, Paul, in chapter 10 goes over the example of the Israelites in the wilderness and how their licentious living cost them their lives and brought upon them the fury of God. We should never view our freedom in Christ as a license to sin.

That leads us into the fourth section, chapters 11-14, which addresses issues of order in the church. Order when it comes to men and women and their place, order when it comes to practicing communion/the Lord’s table, and order when it comes to using spiritual gifts in the church. The Corinthian church was disorderly, and people were disregarding and/or confused about the Word of God and living out what pleased them. So when it came to woman and men in the church, a woman were not submitting to the headship of man, and perhaps the men also were neglecting their responsibility to lead the women in the church and allowing them to take roles of authority that the men were supposed to fill like preaching and teaching other men. It seemed like also the women were dressing up in such a way so as to look like men. So Paul says, in verse 3 of chapter 11: “*But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ*.” And communion was done in a disorderly way as well where they were not coming to the Lord’s table in the right heart but to indulge themselves. He says in 11:20 “*Therefore, when you meet together in the same place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first, and one is hungry and another is drunk*.” So he reminds them of the words of Jesus when He instituted communion for the church to practice to show them the right way to do it.

Then from chapter 12 till 14, he speaks on spiritual gifts and what they are used for and why God gave spiritual gifts to the church. Speaking of spiritual gifts, he says in chapter 12:7 “*But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for what is profitable*.” Not for their own profit, but for the profit and edification of the other. And he speaks about prophecy and tongues in chapter 14, but sandwiched in the middle of chapter 12 and 14 is chapter 13, which is that great chapter on love, because without a motivation of love in using these spiritual gifts, they profit nothing for anyone. Spiritual gifts like tongues and prophecy should not be used to cause chaos and division and confusion but order and unity and love. The Corinthian church had those who had the gift of tongues and several of them who had that gift started speaking all at once, or those who had the gift of prophecy were all trying to speak at once. The end result chaos and confusion, and that is especially bad when an unbeliever walks in and concludes from this that that church is mad. That leads us into chapter 15 which is on the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection from the dead. Paul takes time to reason and to detail out why the cross and resurrection is so important. The resurrection is not only the basis for our faith, but also the basis for how we live out our faith.

…Because there were some Corinthian believers who believed that the resurrection of the dead was not true or will never happen. 15:12 “*Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead*?” And apparently, because there were some who were preaching that the resurrection of the dead was false, they therefore concluded that to live for this earth’s pleasures was the best thing to do. A common phrase for that time was “*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*,” which is what some Corinthian believers presumably believed in.

Chapter 16 then concludes with some final instructions and greetings, including answering one last practical question the Corinthian believers had on how to collect money for the saints in Jerusalem. But a rejection of the resurrection explains why the Corinthians were living so worldly and for this earth and for their sinful pleasures, because they lost sight of heaven. Because they lost sight of eternity. Because they lost sight of the transforming power of God’s love shown at the cross, and how the love of God is the lens by which we live out our lives whether privately in our homes or publicly in the church. There is a challenging but true quote by this one Christian author that I like us to think about as we close: “*If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next*.” I’m excited to study this passage because I think this is immensely practical for us as a church today and I hope you are excited as I am to go through what God has to say to us through this book. So next week and beyond, as we fly the plane down from a 30,000 ft to a 5000 ft perspective, think about your life and whether you are living your life because you love the world or because you love Christ. And let the love of Christ change everything about how you think and act for your good and His glory. [pray]