

# An introduction to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians

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The Bible is not just a book to be read and be studied. It is to be applied. It is good to listen to a sermon or even read our Bible in our daily devotional times, but **one of the main goals of reading God's Word is so that we can apply it to our lives.** The goal is for God's truth to affect how we think, how we talk, how we feel, and how we act. But that is easier said than done.

We live in a world that is hostile to the things of God. Because of this, living holy lives in the real world is often a challenge. As we struggle with the sin around us, the temptations within us, and the sin patterns from our past, we must remember who we are in Christ and that we have been made holy so that we can live holy lives.

This is the focus of 1 Corinthians. It was written to a real church, with real people, with real problems. 1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul, almost 2,000 years ago, but we will see that these timeless truths still apply today.

As we seek to understand this letter it will help us if we know the historical context of Corinth and the Corinthian church.

## **The city of Corinth**

Corinth had originally been founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It had been one of the largest and richest port cities in ancient Greece. It was strategically located on the isthmus that divided northern Greece and southern Greece (Peloponnese). It was the center of a north-south trade route by land and an east-west trade route by sea. A trip around the southern tip of Greece, known as the cape of Malea, would have added an additional 400 kilometers to the trip, and those waters were so dangerous that there was a saying among the sailors of that time: "A sailor never takes a journey around Malea until he first writes his will." Because of this most ships chose to pass through the Isthmus of Corinth instead.

The isthmus was only 6.5 kilometers wide. Small ships would be dragged across the isthmus on wooden logs, and if the ship was too big it would unload its cargo to be dragged across the isthmus while the ship sailed around the southern tip of Greece. Ships from as far west as Spain and as far east as Egypt used this route to transport their goods.

In 146 B.C., Corinth belonged to the Achaean League, a confederation of Hellenistic city-states. The population at this time is believed to have been around 90,000 people. At one point Rome commanded that the confederation be disbanded. Corinth refused and the city was destroyed by the Romans. The men were killed and the women and children were sold into slavery.

In 44 B.C., about 100 years later, Julius Caesar refounded the city and populated it with freed slaves from countries such as Italy, Syria, Egypt and Judea. Many former Roman soldiers were also allowed to move to Corinth. Because of its strategic location, New Corinth thrived and grew to be a booming metropolis and commercial trade hub of close to 200,000 in population. Rome even made it the provincial capital of Greece.

In 1858, the city of Corinth was destroyed by an earthquake. As a result, the modern-day city of Corinth was rebuilt about 5 kilometers northeast of its original location. This allowed archaeologists to begin significant excavations in the old city. These excavations have now taught us much about the Corinth of New Testament times.

## Corinth in Paul's day

The Corinth of Paul's day was a city of much wealth, many cultures, many religions and much immorality. It was a city where all lifestyles, beliefs and practices were accepted. Since it was a city of trade, many people passed through the city, spending their money and enjoying their anonymity to partake in immoral pleasures that they would probably never participate in, in their home countries, around family and friends.

Archaeologists have found remains of many temples to different gods in the ruins of Corinth. The heart of the city, the forum, was filled with temples and shrines to the Roman emperor and his family members alongside the older Greek gods. The most well-known were the temple to Apollos and the temple to Aphrodite. The temple to Aphrodite was up on the mountain behind Corinth. According to Strabo, the temple of Aphrodite was said to have had 1,000 male and female temple prostitutes who would serve its followers during the day, and at night would descend down into the city to serve the people of Corinth.

Corinth had such a bad reputation in its day that there was even a Greek verb that was added to the Greek language, "corinthianize", which meant "to practice fornication or sexual immorality". This was the condition of the city of Corinth when the Apostle Paul first arrived.

## Paul in Corinth

In Acts 13, we read that the church of Antioch was led by the Holy Spirit to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to preach the gospel in Asia Minor. Today that would be modern-day Turkey. During this first trip, in the face of great difficulties, many people put their faith in Jesus and several churches were started. Eventually Paul would go on a second mission journey. During this second trip, God led Paul to Europe for the first time. It was during this trip that he first arrived in the city of Corinth, which was located in Greece. We know from scripture that Paul remained there for a year and a half, and during this time many people put their faith in Christ (Acts 18:11).

From the story in Acts 18, we know that when the Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth he met two believers, named Aquila and Priscilla.

Aquila and Priscilla, along with all the other Jews in Rome, had been expelled by emperor Claudius. Because Paul had the same occupation as they, Paul worked with them as tentmakers and stayed with them. He likely first met them in the synagogue where people of like trade usually sat together. At this time Paul began to preach to the Jews in the synagogue. Many believed in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and put their faith in Him (Acts 18:4). Other Jews rejected Paul and his teachings about the gospel. Eventually their refusal of the message drove Paul out of the synagogue (Acts 18:5-6). Paul then began to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the Greeks and other Gentiles who lived in Corinth (Acts 18:7-10). As people put their faith in Jesus they were added to the church. The number of believers in Corinth grew and it became a multi-cultural congregation (Acts 18:10) of both Jews and Gentiles.

One can see why God led Paul to Corinth as God sought to spread the Gospel to the west. The city was strategically located. It was not bound by traditional religious views. Most of the people were searching for a better life, especially all of those who were former slaves. They were separated from their friends and families of origin and were in need of community. All of this made them more open to new ideas, truths, and loving community, which they needed. Those who came to Christ from the trade industry could spread Christ as they continued their travels to other places, and those who had migrated to Corinth could take Christ with them to their home country. Paul easily became accustomed to Corinth, because it was similar to his hometown, Tarsus, and his home church city, Antioch.

God had worked mightily in Corinth. This young church was proof that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could penetrate even the hardest of soils and the darkest of cultures, but the battle did not end once people put their faith in Jesus. They were now spiritual infants trying to survive in a sinful world. They struggled against the godless society around them, the temptations within them, and the sinful patterns of the past that sought to ensnare them. Through Christ they were now counted as holy. Now they must trust in Him as they sought to live out this newfound holiness in their daily lives. God had used Paul and others to lead this new congregation, but now it was time for them to take responsibility for their own faith.

After living in Corinth for 18 months, Paul moved to a city named Ephesus, where he stayed for three years. While there he preached, started churches, made disciples and trained leaders. Towards the end of his time in Ephesus, he received news of problems in the church in Corinth. There was immaturity,

division, sexual immorality, suing each other in the courts, abuse of the Lord's Supper, false teaching and many other questions that needed to be addressed. In response, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians as a letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote as their spiritual father, shepherding the flock.

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9:

*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,*

*<sup>2</sup>To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:*

*<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— <sup>6</sup>even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup>who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

It was God who had called Paul. Paul had been a hater of Jesus and a persecutor of Christians (1 Corinthians 15:9). To most he should have been the last person that God would use, but we see once again the undeserved grace of God. Yes, Paul was a Hebrew scholar. He knew the Old Testament and pursued religion with a passion. He seemed to have a bright future in religious circles, but he was deceived. That was until Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

Paul's conversion was immediate and brought a total change of heart. God then began to use Paul's knowledge of the scriptures to explain why Jesus was the promised Messiah. God used Paul's passion and unwavering faith to preach the gospel fearlessly and start churches, even when his life was endangered.

Paul was called by God to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Some might read this verse and wonder why Paul always builds himself up by calling himself an apostle, but in reality by referring to himself as an apostle he was really humbling himself before his readers. Paul was not saying, "praise me." He was saying, "you should really listen to me."

The church in Corinth understood what it meant to be an apostle. There was a Jewish supreme court in Jerusalem known as the "Sanhedrin". This court was made up of 70 of the wisest elders of Israel. They made moral decisions and religious decisions that impacted every Jew in the world. If there was a problem amongst the Jews and no lower court could solve it, it would be passed up to the Sanhedrin.

Once a decision was made by the Sanhedrin, they would send out a man to take the verdict back to the community of Jews who had asked for it. The man who delivered this message was called an apostle,

“one who is sent”. He was a messenger, an envoy, an ambassador who spoke with the authority of the Sanhedrin. The apostle had no independence. He was bound to communicate the message with which he had been entrusted.

Paul was claiming this idea: “I have been sent out. I do not speak to you my own ideas or from my own authority. I speak as a mere messenger of Jesus Christ, and this is what He says.”

1 Corinthians 1:1 continues with these words: ***“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.”*** Who is Sosthenes? He is most likely Paul’s amanuensis. This would have been Paul’s secretary or scribe. He would have been the one who helped Paul get all of these ideas on paper. We see other amanuenses throughout scripture.

Now, remember that Paul is writing this letter in Ephesus, over in Asia Minor. Why would he take the time to give the name of his amanuensis? We see the answer over in Acts 18:17. In Acts 18, Paul arrived in Corinth. As we have already seen, Paul began to preach to the Jews in the synagogue. Many believed, but other Jews did not. Eventually the Jews opposed Paul so strongly that he left the synagogue and began preaching to the Gentiles. At this point Paul went to the house of Titius Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, who had become a believer in the Lord.

Later in Acts 18 it says that, ***“the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal.”*** Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, the province where Corinth was, listened to their accusations and finally declared that they were nothing but mere disagreements within Judaism. He instructed them to solve it themselves. He then had all the Jews driven out of the tribunal. Acts 18:17 then says this: ***“And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal.”*** Sosthenes had become the synagogue leader, likely because Titius Crispus had become a believer. Out of frustration at the failure of their united attack against Paul, they exited the tribunal, and right there, in full public view they beat their synagogue leader, Sosthenes.

We do not know what happened between Acts 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 1:1, but something dramatic had occurred. The Jewish synagogue leader, who had led the mob against the apostle Paul, was now Paul’s secretary. How great is that? Sosthenes became a believer and was now serving the kingdom of God by Paul’s side.

God’s marvelous grace displayed in Paul’s conversion as well as in Sosthenes’ lay the groundwork for verse 2 and 3. Paul and Sosthenes were not writing about abstract theology, they were writing of the grace of God that they had experienced firsthand:

***Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,***

***<sup>2</sup>To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:***

***<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

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Paul was not called because of his own goodness or his own initiative. God drew Paul to Himself and gifted Him with the faith to believe (Ephesians 2:8-9). Then God sent Paul out with God's authority to proclaim God's message.

Paul then addresses this letter to the church of God in Corinth. Not the church of Paul or the church of the elders, it was God's church who had received God's message and been saved by God's grace. Because of that they were now God's children and thus God's church. It is interesting that the Greek word for church was *Ekklesia*. Its literal meaning was broken into two parts. "Ek" was a preposition which meant "out of", and the second part of the word came from the verb "kaleo" which meant "to call". When put together and referring to a group of people, they were literally "the called out ones". Like Paul, they, too, had been called out of the world to become children of God.

The difficulty was that many of the problems and vices of their world were now finding their way into the church. As has been mentioned before, this church in Corinth was having problems with sexual immorality, division, false teaching, infighting and even suing each other in the courts. It is interesting to see that **in light of their struggles, the first thing Paul does is to bring the people and their situations into the presence of the cross.** In the first 10 verses in 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions Jesus Christ no fewer than 10 times. He reminds them of what Christ has done for them so that they will do the same for others. He reminds them of who they are in Christ so that they will act like children of the King and not desperate, homeless orphans. They no longer have to fight amongst themselves to meet their own needs. All their needs have been met in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). They no longer have to worry and seek control over others, because they have been saved by the sovereign King of kings who rules over all things. Paul knows that only through Christ will their hearts be humbled and unity brought about in the church. So, Paul ushers them back to Christ.

Paul then addresses the church of Corinth with these words: **"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints."** That was his greeting. Remember Paul was writing to a church that had many problems with sin and yet he refers to them as "those who have been sanctified". Sanctified meant "those who have been made holy". Paul then calls them saints. The Greek word for saints literally meant "holy ones". But how could Paul address them in this way? Were they not the ones who were sinning? Here is the truth of what Paul was saying. Some have referred to it as **"the now and the not yet"**.

For those who have trusted in Jesus Christ, they have been forgiven of sin. They have been given a new nature, been made into a new creature, been given the Spirit of Christ and have been reconciled to God. We must remember that Christ took upon Himself our sin so that **"in Him we might become the righteousness of God"** (2 Corinthians 5:21). **Because of Christ's death and resurrection our debt has been paid and we have been made right with God. We are guilty but are now counted as innocent.** We did not earn it. We did not deserve it. Our forgiven status with God rests completely on what Christ has done. **When God, the Father, now looks at us He sees the righteousness of Christ. This is our identity in Christ. This is the truth of "the now"**. That is why Paul refers to these believers in the church at Corinth as saints, even though some of them are caught up in sin.

The second part that we must understand is the **“not yet”**. We have been made holy. That is the positional truth of our identity in Christ, but our behavior is not yet completely holy. We have been counted as righteous, and now, for the rest of our lives, God will refine us to make our desires, thoughts, emotions, words and actions righteous. It will be a long process, but God has promised to make us like Christ.

The believers in Corinth were holy in the eyes of God, but they did not always act like it. They struggled with the sinful society that surrounded them. They warred against the temptations that came from within. To make it even worse, many in the church in Corinth were from pagan backgrounds (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). God had saved them mightily, but when they drifted from God and His Word and His people, these old patterns of the flesh would seek to draw them back into sin. Just like many of us, they had past habitual sins that sought to gain dominance over them once again.

Many pastors would have seen this church stained by sin, and just turned away and chosen to minister somewhere else, but not Paul. He looked at this church as sheep without a shepherd. He saw Christ in them and that was his hope. Not that they could fix themselves, but that as the Spirit of Christ was rekindled in them, that they, who were counted as holy, could once again walk in the way of holiness. Paul did not appeal to their pride, or their ego, or their fleshly desires, to somehow reach a superficial solution. He did not try to manipulate them through guilt, or shame, or even angry criticism. **He appealed to the Spirit of Christ that lived in them, confident that those who were truly in Christ would respond as the Spirit led.**

Paul then concluded his greeting reminding those in Corinth that they were, **“called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Those in Corinth were not alone. They might have seen themselves as the minority and overwhelmingly outnumbered by those of the world, but Paul reassured them that they were part of something so much bigger, the universal church.

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In verse 4 Paul gives thanks to God for the grace that was given to them in Christ Jesus. This phrase **“in Christ Jesus”** is very important in Paul’s writings. It is more than just believing the teachings of Christ or believing that Jesus existed. Through faith we have received grace and the Spirit of Christ now dwells in us and we now are in Him. All blessings and grace are ours when we are united in Christ.

Paul then has his readers view the grace of God from the perspective of the past, present and future. In the past they have received God’s grace. Through His grace they were **“enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge –even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed”** among them. Paul is reminding them of the past proofs of salvation that were apparent in their congregation. Paul is encouraging them to remember what God has already done in their midst and in many of their lives.

Because of what Christ has done for them in the past, they lack nothing. In Christ, they now, in the present, have access to every resource and gift that they need to live holy lives.

Paul then transitions to the future and the promises that God has given. In verses 7-9, Paul continues: *“So that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

As we look to the future we know that Jesus Christ, who lives in us, has secured our guiltlessness before God. We can be confident that when we stand before the judgment throne of God that we will be counted as innocent and enter into eternity with Christ. We know that He will sustain us to the end. What waits for us between now and the end? We don't know, but **our confidence is not found in knowing what lies ahead, our confidence is in knowing who lies within.** Who is with us? He is Jesus Christ, our Prince of Peace, our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, our Deliverer, our Provider, our Advocate, our Good Shepherd, our Great High Priest, our Redeemer, our Rock, Our Emmanuel, “God with us”. We must remember that when we are almost overcome by a sinful world and almost giving in to a tempting desire, that Jesus is the source of our victory and our peace. We are holy. Now may we submit to Christ's refining process and live a life of holiness.

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Think back through these questions to help you apply these verses. What can you relate with from the context of the church in Corinth? Have you ever tried to live a holy life in an unholy environment? Do you believe that God can truly change the sinful heart of man? Do you believe that Jesus' death and resurrection has completely covered your sin, or do you believe there is still something that you need to do to earn a more complete salvation? Do you believe that you are a saint, even in the moments when you sin? Are you able to stand on your identity as holy as a motivation to live a holy life? Does the love of Christ found in the gospel motivate you to greater holiness? Are you drifting away from Christ at this moment and missing out on all the resources that God has given for holy living? Do your old sin patterns ever seek to tempt you again? When you come in contact with God's truth, does it move you back towards holiness or not affect you at all? Is God making you more holy than you used to be? If you have put your faith in Christ, be encouraged that as you abide in Christ, day at a time, He will bring about holiness in your life.

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### **Discussion questions:**

1. What about this lesson on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 was most meaningful to you?
2. What about the city of Corinth did you find interesting?
3. Why did Paul use the word “saints” as he addressed a church that was guilty of various sins?
4. When Paul addressed their problems he started by taking them back to Jesus to gain proper perspective. Why is this important?

5. In your own words explain the idea of “the now and the not yet” in regards to holiness in the life of a Christian.
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9?
7. How do you think God wants you to apply this lesson to your life?