

December 1

1 Corinthians 5-11

I'm Margie Alford the Connections worship leader and I want to welcome you to the Project 4:4 accelerator for December 1st.

We will be looking today at 1 Corinthians 5-11:16

Chapters 1-6 of 1st Corinthians deal with the problems that Paul, the spiritual father of this church, wants to address.

Chapter 5 starts out with quite a harsh statement to the church:

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans." Wow.....

I do not suppose that things were so very different in the New Testament church as they are today. The same reasons to "tolerate" sin existed then as they do right now.

Not wanting to confront, not wanting to appear "holier than thou", not wanting to bring up sin with the fear that someone else will come along to expose our own sinfulness.

The manner in which the discipline in this case was handled is very strong. Because this man did not repent, Paul told them to publicly assemble and "hand this man over to Satan." But did you notice the rest of what he said?

"So that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord." The believers were to expel the unrepentant man from the congregation with the prayer that forcing him to live in Satan's domain would wake him up in time to save him.

This scripture also says that we have no mandate to judge the people of the world who do not acknowledge our Lord or live by our standards, but we have an obligation to hold fellow believers accountable to the person and the will of God.

Another problem which Paul adds to the subject of disunity is that of lawsuits between believers.

The very fact that two Christians would end up in a civil court is just awful because the testimony of the church is badly damaged by such actions. We are the ones who are supposed to love one another. We are family and we are the ones whose lives are marked by the presence of Christ's Spirit and the primary mark of the Spirit's work in our life is a willingness to submit to one another in love -- to prefer the interests of the other above our own!!

Because we do live in an imperfect world, we have to recognize that from time to time believers will disagree. If you find yourself in that uncomfortable position, Paul says the best way to handle it may well be to yield to your brother -- even if you end up with the short end of the stick. 5:8 says, why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? I believe the answer to this is that we usually want it all to turn out fair for us. Our pride will tell us that we are right, and someone has wronged us. Paul says this attitude is not how a believer should act. That can be pretty hard to swallow.

1 Corinthians 7 deals with the subjects of marriage and divorce.

One thing to notice right away is that this is a transition point of the letter. Paul writes, "Now for the matters you wrote about." Up to this point in the letter Paul has been addressing his his concerns for the Corinthian church. Now, beginning with chapter 7, he is going to answer the questions that the Corinthian believers have asked him in a letter which they sent to him.

The other thing I want to point out before we talk about the content of this chapter is the fact that Paul very carefully distinguishes between his own opinion and what the Lord has already said. He says for example, to the unmarried and widows I say ..., and he gives his view. Then a couple verses later he says to the married I give this command (not I but the Lord). Then in the next paragraph: To the rest I say (I not the Lord). Later "to the virgins I have no command from the Lord" but I can give you my opinion ... It is like that right through this entire chapter.

Paul wants to make it very clear that there is a difference (in his own mind a very big difference) between God's Word and his own opinion. He wants people to be able to distinguish one from the other. Since we believe that Paul was writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we might tend to say "what difference does it make?" If Paul said it and the Holy Spirit let him write it down, that makes it just as normative for us as it would have been if it came from the lips of Jesus Christ himself.

That may be true, but the degree of care taken by this apostle to distinguish between "This is what God says" and "This is my own view on the matter" was very important to Paul.

Paul has a great deal to say about marriage and divorce.

First, noting the dangerous times in which he and his readers were living, he advises young people not to marry at all. In such unstable times (presumably he was looking at the persecutions of Christians which would ultimately cause Paul and Peter both their lives). He even says, "it will not always be so but for now, if you can, stay single." That is Paul's opinion.

He would also still say, the single person can focus wholly upon what will glorify God while a married person of necessity must keep one eye upon the needs of their family.

The other side of Paul's advice would certainly still be the same. For most people it is still better to marry. "It is better to marry than to burn with passion" and there is nothing whatever dishonorable or "second class" about marriage.

Paul believes that divorce is wrong. He says that even if your spouse is an unbeliever, as long as they are willing to stay with you, you must not divorce them.

This passage teaches us that, even though it may not be very evident, unbelieving wives and husbands are affected by their partner's faith in important and positive ways.

Certainly it is not teaching that any man or woman will go to heaven without having put their own faith and trust in Christ as Lord and Savior. That would contradict the clear teaching of other parts of God's Word. But make no mistake, if your spouse is not a believer, your love for them and for Christ and your consistent testimony for godliness will have a positive impact. It will make a difference -- and its effect will be even greater upon the children of such a union.

Paul does recognize that sometimes marital separations will occur. It is not God's best but sometimes it will happen. If a Christian takes the initiative in such a separation (something Paul definitely discourages) they must live as a single person or be reconciled. There is no place for divorce in Paul's thought in that instance.

But if the non-Christian refuses to stay with the Christian spouse, Paul says, let them go.

If you are not married and decide to exercise your freedom to enter into matrimony, Paul says you are only free to marry a Christian -- someone who is "in the Lord." He has given this rule for your protection and disregarding it can cause great pain. God really does want what is best for us.

Paul's words to believers with unbelieving spouses are there because many people came (and still come) to Christ after they were already married. The principle which is clearly stated and illustrated in several different ways in this chapter is that God has a "come as you are" policy for His kingdom. Each one should retain the place in life he had when God called him to salvation. If you are already married, stay married. If you were divorced and remarried, stay with your second spouse. If you were divorced and single, you reconcile with your mate or stay single.

1 Corinthians 8-10

Here we find the Paul responding to the second question asked by the Corinthian believers. Put in its most simple form the question was "should we eat meat offered in heathen sacrifices to idols?"

Greek and Roman society was completely saturated with pagan idolatry. When sacrifices were made in any of the many temples in Corinth (and given the number of different gods being worshipped in that society, there would have been a lot of temples), the meat of the sacrifice would normally be divided into three portions.

The first portion belonged to whatever deity was being worshipped -- that would be burned up. The second part was given to the one bringing the offering -- he would go home and eat it with his family. The third part was given to the priest who could not possibly consume all the meat he was given each day. His practice then would be to take the surplus meat to the public market where it would be sold. Much of the meat being offered for sale then had first been offered to an idol.

There were at least two questions floating around this issue that bothered the Christians in Corinth: 1) Was the meat spiritually contaminated? Did the pagan god have an effect on the meat? 2) Even if the meat was still o.k., if you ate meat like that would it harm your Christian brothers who did have issues with the idea of eating it?

Now what possible relevance could such a question have for us? The meat I buy at the grocery store has not been offered to any idols (unless of course you are talking about the god of money). The answer surprisingly is that Paul's remarks on this issue lead him to a much larger question -- the issue of Christian liberty. The principles he lays down here have extreme relevance for us every single day of our lives, for we, just like the Corinthian Christians must live in a pagan society and learn what it means to be "in the world" without being "of the world."

The first question the Corinthians asked was an easy one to answer. Idols are "nothing at all." They have no power and they have no ability therefore to contaminate the meat or cast any kind of spell over those who eat it. "Food," Paul says, "does not bring us close to God. We are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do." It is the second question -- "even if the meat is o.k., should we eat it?" that proves to be much more complex. Paul's answer gives us the foundational teaching of the New Testament on the subject of Christian liberty.

The general principle that we must grasp is this. In Christ we have an enormous amount of freedom but if it will make it easier for someone to come to Christ, or if it will help to strengthen a brother or sister in Christ who is weak, then we have a tremendous obligation to choose not to exercise our freedom and deny ourselves for the sake of others.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 9:19-22: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone ... To the Jews I become like a Jew, to win the Jews ... to the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul says I will adapt in every way I can -- even if it means giving up my rights because I want people to come to know Jesus Christ as Lord. There is a word now for that kind of ministry. It is called "incarnational" because Jesus became like us so that we would be able to hear and respond to him.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

The issue that Paul deals with in the opening verses of chapter 11 is the proper decorum of men and women in public prayer.

Here are a few observations about the station of women in the first century world.

They were not highly regarded or well treated. Women in that day had few rights and privileges and were more or less treated as property. The role of a woman was to produce heirs and care for them and manage the household well while the husband kept the public affairs of the family and amused himself with a concubine or two if he so chose. With no rights or privileges, subject to whatever whim her husband might have, the lot of the first century woman was not an enviable one. She was no different than a slave.

When the good news of the gospel penetrated the society of Corinth women as well as men responded and found the great freedom of which Paul was speaking just a few chapters ago, free in Christ and equal before God with their husbands.

Some of the women in Corinth took their new found freedom and began to revel in it, and abuse it, so much they began to tarnish the reputation of the church by acting in ways that seemed scandalous to those around them.

Engaging in worship with uncovered heads was something that seemed wrong because it constituted a challenge to the authority of the women's husbands. In the culture of first century Corinth, submission was demonstrated by wearing a head covering.

Submission is an important trait.

Wearing head coverings today does not have the same meaning as it did in Paul's day, but the principle of submission still needs to be honored.

Ok, there you have it.

Many of these passages are debated among churches and great men of God. There are some hard things to understand. Unfortunately, many arguments have come from "discussing" many of these passages that we have read today. I suppose that will go on as long as we are on this earth.

So I end today quoting the verse from Paul. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"

God bless you all. See you tomorrow.