

The Corinthians – Seeking Spiritual Success in a Corrupt World

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A study of the city of Corinth is fascinating. During the first century, because of its location between two harbors, it was a powerful and prosperous commercial city of the Roman Empire. It was also the capitol and chief city of the Roman province of Achaia which is modern day Greece.

As we mentioned, it was strategically situated on the Isthmus. The Isthmus is a four miles wide stretch of land between the Gulf of Corinth on the west and the Saronic Gulf on the east that connected Greece and Peloponnese (southern Greece). During the time of Paul, there was a road across the Isthmus that connected the two gulfs which cut off 200 miles of sailing in dangerous waters. Today, there is a canal. Corinth controlled the Isthmus and thereby controlled the commerce of the region which made it the richest commercial city of Greece.

When speaking of Corinth, it is probably most noted for its corruption. As is often the case, wealth, commerce, and idolatry brought with it moral degradation. There were a number of shrines and temples in Corinth, but probably the most notorious was the temple of the goddess Aphrodite (goddess of love and beauty). It is said that there were one thousand prostitute prophetesses who served within this temple. One can only imagine the licentious rituals that took place. In fact, the Corinthians were so noted for sexual perversion that the Aristophanes coined the Greek verb Korinthiazomai (to Corinthianize) which meant to act like a Corinthian which was synonymous with sexual immorality and fornication (Fragmenta 354). Clearly the Corinthians lived in a corrupt world.

Because of the various problems that Paul addressed in the Corinthian church, it is just as clear, the corrupt world had an impact upon them. In nearly every chapter in his first book to the Corinthians church, Paul confronted a different problem. In chapters 1 and 3, he addressed their contentions and their party spirit. In chapter 5, he dealt with gross immorality of one who was having an affair with his father's wife. Sadly, the Christians in Corinth were puffed up about it rather than mourned about it. In chapter 6, it was necessary for Paul to address the problem of a brother going to law against a brother. In chapter 7, he spoke about marital obligations. In chapter 8, he dealt with eating meats sacrificed to idols. In chapter 9, he defended his apostleship. In chapters 10 and 11, Paul confronted some issues concerning the Lord's supper. In chapters 12-14, he addressed some problems concerning the Holy Spirit. In chapter 15, there must have been a problem with the resurrection, and thus, Paul gave instruction concerning it. And finally, in chapter 16, he dealt with a problem concerning the collection.

Since it is the case that the Corinthian Christians were influenced by the world, how then did they become successful spiritually? What did they do or what actions did they take to become successful in a spiritual way? Please consider these thoughts:

They Became Christians

The first step in becoming spiritually successful is to become a Christian, and many of the Corinthians did this very thing. In Acts 18:8 Luke records, "...and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized." Clearly, this is a direct fulfillment of the Great Commission as recorded by Mark. He wrote that Jesus said unto them, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15-16).

In his inspired writings to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote about what they did in order to become Christians. As Luke wrote, they heard the word and believed. Paul commented about this in 1 Corinthians 3:5, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?” In other words, the Corinthians came to belief by the preaching and teaching of Paul and Apollos. Further, notice the Christians at Corinth repented of their sins. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul wrote,

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, ¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Because they “were” these things, indicates they had repented and turned from them. In addition, the Christians at Corinth “obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered” to them (Romans 6:17) — that is, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote,

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; ² By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. ³ For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; ⁴ And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

When did they obey that “form of doctrine”? When they were buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). It was at this moment God added them to the church which is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12). Paul wrote of this in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

The first step in becoming spiritually successful is to become a Christian. Are you right with God? If a person wants to be spiritually successful, he or she ought to follow the example of the Corinthians by becoming a Christian.

They Maintained Faithfulness

The second step in becoming spiritually successful is to maintain faithfulness. This is the reason Paul wrote his first letter to them about all the problems that existed in the church at Corinth. His desire for them was to deal with these various problems in order for them to maintain their faithfulness. This is further demonstrated in the tone of the books. 1 Corinthians is basically a call to repentance, while 2 Corinthians is mainly a commendation of their actions. Commenting on this, Paul wrote,

For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice,

not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing (2 Corinthians 7:8-9).

With this in mind, notice some of the exhortations found within the books.

Because of contentions within the Corinthian church, Paul wrote, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Paul's desire was a change in heart. He did not want them to have a party spirit but to be like minded in order for them to be faithful unto God.

Because of gross sexual immorality, Paul exhorted them "not to keep company with fornicators" (1 Corinthians 5:9). The man fornicating with his father's wife needed to be disciplined and withdrawn from. Why? Because "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Thankfully, the Corinthian Christians acted properly, and the man was restored (2 Corinthians 2:6ff). Thus, because this exhortation was followed, these Christians maintained faithfulness.

Because of the problem of eating meats sacrificed to idols, Paul urged in 1 Corinthians 8:13, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." If an action causes a brother or sister to apostatize, then we need to reconsider the action whether or not we believe it is sinful. A person cannot maintain faithfulness while causing a brother or sister to sin.

Because of the problems connected with the supper of the Lord, Paul wrote, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). A person cannot maintain faithfulness without worshiping properly, and, therefore, Paul addresses this problem. Again, his desire was their faithfulness.

Because of the misunderstanding of the resurrection, in 1 Corinthians 15:58 Paul exhorted, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." The church must have become slothful and in need of encouragement. So Paul wrote of the grand events that would take place on the resurrection day and encouraged them to maintain their labors in the Lord.

A final exhortation for our consideration is 2 Corinthians 13:5. Paul wrote, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

In order for them, and us, to maintain faithfulness, consider these seven areas of faithfulness in which Paul exhorted them:

In order to be faithful, a person must not possess a party spirit. Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians were carnal minded and walked as men because of they were filled with envy and strife (1 Corinthians 3:3). Faithful Christians must repent of such.

In order to be faithful, a person must not be engaged in gross immorality. Remember, the Christians in Corinth were fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, abusers of themselves with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, and extortioners. They understand they could not inherit the kingdom of God and live in such a way (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). They repented, and so must we if we intend to be faithful unto God.

In order to be faithful, a person must worship correctly. Within 1 Corinthians, Paul was clearly concerned with worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:40, he wrote concerning the assembly, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Further, he addressed the various avenues of worship. Proper worship concerning the Lord's supper is of utmost importance. Paul wrote, "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Corinthians 11:29). Concerning teaching, he wrote, "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Also, he addressed the individual responsibility of giving proportionately in 1 Corinthians 16:2. And, he addressed singing and praying with the spirit and understanding in 1 Corinthians 14:15.

In order to be faithful, a person must forgive. Apparently there were those in the Corinthian church that had not forgiven the man who had fornicated with his father's wife. So, in 2 Corinthians 1:10 he wrote, "To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ." This ought to remind us one of the Beatitudes of the Lord, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). A lesson they ought to have learned, and a lesson we would do well to learn.

In order to be faithful, a person must repent. This point can be easily illustrated, but consider 2 Corinthians 7:9-10. Here, Paul states that the Corinthian Christians had godly sorrow which lead them to repentance. He then contrasts their sorrow with that of the world. The world is sorrow because they have been caught, but faithful Christians repent because they mourn over their sins (Matthew 5:4).

In order to be faithful, a person must give of him or herself. Concerning the saints in Macedonia, Paul commended them because they gave liberally even in their poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Why and how were they able to do this? By inspiration, Paul wrote they "first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God." As an illustration of this, a chicken and a pig were conversing. The chicken said, "Pig, we ought to give some ham and eggs to the children's home." The pig said, "Not so, Chicken. For you, it is a contribution, but for me, it is a commitment and a sacrifice." Unlike the pig, the Christians in Macedonia gave of themselves.

Finally, in order to be faithful, a person must be watchful. Paul warned of false apostles and deceitful workers who transformed themselves into the apostles of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). If a person is not watchful and vigilant, he or she will be carried off into apostasy.

They Looked Forward

A third step in becoming spiritually successful that we can learn from the church at Corinth is to look forward. We have seen what they did in the past — that is, to become a Christian. Then, we

considered their present need of maintaining faithfulness. Now, we will contemplate Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church about the future.

First, they were instructed to look forward to greater service. This is seen in a number of examples but consider these two. Again, after his marvelous discourse on the resurrection, Paul concludes by exhorting them, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). In 2 Corinthians 5:15, he wrote, "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." Thus, Paul used the resurrection and the death of Christ as a motivation toward greater service.

Second, they were instructed to look forward to the things that are not seen. Like all faithful Christians (2 Timothy 3:12), Paul and apparently the Corinthian church were being persecuted. So, Paul reminded them, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; ¹⁸ While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). They, like we, need to learn the important things of life are not things. Things are temporal, but the unseen are the spiritual which is eternal.

Third, they were instructed to look forward to the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). Though there are some things we do not know or possibly do not understand about the resurrection, there are many things we can know. There will be a great change that will take place on resurrection day. This corruptible and mortal body of flesh and blood will change to a body of incorruption and immortality. It will take place suddenly in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and it will take place "when the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more." "Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory." "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul in his second letter reminds them of this great and notable event. He wrote, "Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you" (2 Corinthians 4:14). Most assuredly, the faithful in Christ can look forward to this great day.

Fourth, they were instructed to look forward to the judgment. Like the faithful in Corinth, if we labor in Christ, we can look forward to appearing before Him in judgment. Every person will appear before Him, but only the faithful can look forward to standing before Him. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul wrote, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." In Matthew 25, Jesus taught three parables concerning the judgment. In His last parable in that chapter, He spoke of a Shepherd who will separate the sheep from the goats. To the goats, He said, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41), but to the sheep He said, "Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). To you, is it a day of anticipation or a day of dread?

Fifth, they were instructed to look forward to the prize. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul used an illustration taken from the Isthmus games. Though there are a number of lessons that Paul makes, his most basic exhortation is found in a simple but hard-hitting statement — "So run, that ye may

obtain. In another statement, Paul wrote, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1). Let us run that we may obtain the prize.

The Christians in Corinth were spiritually successful in the face of a corrupt world. Why? Because they became Christians, because they maintained faithfulness, and because they looked forward to greater service and to a reward. If we do the same, we too can be spiritually successful. In order to accomplish this, we must do some examination and must ask ourselves... Am I a Christian? Am I maintaining faithfulness? Can I truly look forward to judgment? Paul's exhortation at the end of his writings to the Corinthian church is certainly appropriate. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" Will you be of the same character as the Corinthian Christians and examine yourself?