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1 Corinthians 1 – 3

“When Wisdom Seems Foolish”

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The apostle Paul wrote the letter to the church in Corinth from Ephesus in 56-57AD. Paul was the “new start” pastor, having founded the church about five years earlier ([Acts 18](#)). Corinth was an important port city of Greece, as well as a Roman capital for that region. It was a large city with approximately 500,000 residents. Corinth was an extremely immoral place. There were at least 12 temples located throughout the city dedicated to idol worship, the most prominent being the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, sex and fertility. This center of pagan worship was essentially a house of prostitution, evidenced by the fact that there were approximately 1,000 male and female prostitutes at the temple at any given time. Incredibly, this is a city that would cause Paul to say, “This looks like a good place to start a church!”

The Corinthian church was very complicated, because they were both spiritual and worldly or carnal. In [1 Corinthians 1:7](#) we’re told they did not lack any spiritual gift, which means there would have been manifestations of miracles and healings, plus words of knowledge, along with tongues and interpretation. Although they didn’t understand the proper use of the gifts, this was a “happenin’ place” for God’s power.

Paul, in [1 Corinthians 3:1](#), addressed their worldliness by saying that he couldn’t call them spiritual, because their behavior demonstrated that he was right to consider them to be worldly (KJV uses the word carnal¹). This church was a moral mess to say the least. There were divisions, scandals, lawsuits, immorality, drunkenness, quarrels, etc., to say nothing about confusion over marriage, money, the Lord’s Supper, and the proper use of spiritual gifts. A careful reading of [1 Corinthians 6:9–10](#) shows the kind of people who were a part of the church, including the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers! However, [1 Corinthians 6:11](#) tells the story of God’s power to change a person’s life when we read that Paul said, “...that is what some of you

¹ <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,carnal> 1. Pertaining to flesh; fleshly; sensual; opposed to spiritual; as carnal pleasure. 2. Being in the natural state; unregenerate. The carnal mind is enmity against God (Romans 8). 3. Pertaining to the ceremonial law; as carnal ordinances (Hebrews 9:10). 4. Lecherous; lustful; libidinous; given to sensual indulgence. Carnal knowledge, sexual intercourse.

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.*” They had come out of various sinful lifestyles, accepted Jesus as Savior and had been filled with the Holy Spirit, but the problem was they were having a hard time going on to maturity. To Paul’s dismay the people in the five-year-old church were still *“infants in Christ.”* (1 Corinthians 3:1) It’s as if Paul was saying, “You’re still baby Christians! What’s up with that?” He was troubled by the fact that they should have been way beyond the display of immature behavior such as quarreling, divisions, lawsuits, immorality and drunkenness, but since they were not, Paul said he would have to address them as *“worldly”* rather than *“spiritual.”*

What was it that was stifling their spiritual growth? It can simply be understood as their difficulty in turning aside from the influence and so-called wisdom of the world and the way the world does things. What happened in Corinth is the same thing that happens in our day; instead of Christians influencing Corinth, Corinth was still influencing Christians. And so Paul writes what amounts to a corrective epistle to try to get the Corinthian church back on track. Actually, his letter is a response to several questions they had about things like marriage, personal liberties, spiritual gifts and money.

It’s interesting to note that Paul doesn’t even begin to address their questions until 1 Corinthians 7:1, which means that the first six chapters are used to give them a spanking over the issue of allowing the philosophy and wisdom of the world to shape how they thought and acted inside and outside the church. Basically he was saying, “There are some things that seem wise in the eyes of the world; and you have embraced those things, but God sees things differently. In fact, the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God, and the things that the world sees as foolish are really the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and 3:18–20).

In our culture, just the fact that you are a Christian will seem foolish to a lot of people. The whole message of Jesus dying on the cross to save us from sin and give us the promise of heaven seems like foolishness to those who don’t believe. There are any number of guidelines and instructions in the Bible that will cause the world to say, “Huh? That doesn’t make sense!” This is where there will be a clash of wisdom in which the world sees some things as being smart that God sees as foolish, and vice versa. There will be a constant feeling that as a Christian, the world will look at your life like you’re dumber than dirt! The call for Christians is to consider that while certain things might be smart in the world’s eyes, but foolish in God’s eyes, it’s best to go God’s way, which means the world will see you as being a fool. There is a limitless supply of issues like this in the Bible, but we’re just going to look at three in this study: leadership, money and revenge.

Leadership

1. The world’s wisdom about leadership is to get ahead any way you can and trample on as many people as you need to to get what you want.
2. God’s wisdom on leadership is that authority comes through submission; that if you would serve people instead of lording authority over them, God will promote you.
3. **Mark 10:42–44** – *“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not*

so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.’ ”

Money

4. The world’s wisdom on money is to keep it and horde it so you’ll have more.
5. God’s wisdom says to give it away and be generous with it so you’ll have more.
6. **Luke 6:38** – *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

Revenge

7. The world’s wisdom when someone does you wrong says, “Get even!”
8. God’s wisdom instructs us to let him deal with those who treat you wrongly, and to “kill them with kindness!” (**Luke 6:28**)
9. **Romans 12:17, 19–21** – *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **1 Corinthians 1:1–9; 3:1–5** to provide an overview for this study.
3. Read and discuss **1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and 3:18–20**.
 - a. Do you think people look at your life and think you’re a fool for believing and living the way you do?
 - b. Read this list of life choices and discuss the difference between the wisdom and ways of the world and the wisdom and ways of God. Focus on the way our thinking is *shaped* by the world and how the Word of God should shape our thinking.
 - i. Raise kids
 - ii. Manage money
 - iii. Treat people
 - iv. Conduct business

- v. Behave on dates
- vi. Commitment in marriage
- vii. Think, talk and act

4. Read and discuss [Mark 10:42–44](#).

- a. Allow the people in your group to share stories of former and current bosses/supervisors who demonstrate the characteristics of worldly leadership and servant leadership.
- b. If you're in secular or church leadership, what examples can you share that might help others in the group learn to model a Biblical, Christ-like leadership style?

5. Read and discuss [Luke 6:38](#).

- a. What would your life be like if you followed the counsel of John Wesley, who said: “Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”
- b. Read and discuss other Scriptures, including: [Deuteronomy 15:10 and Proverbs 19:17, 22:9](#).

6. Read and discuss [Romans 12:17, 19–21](#).

- a. What are some examples that demonstrate the worldly and Godly ways of dealing with others who have wronged you?
- b. Allow someone in your group to share an example and the outcome of situation in which they intentionally and consciously followed God's model in this area.
- c. Are there specific examples of this in Scripture?
 - i. David's refusal to kill Saul on two occasions when it seemed that God had delivered Saul into David's hands is a classic biblical example of this principle. In light of God's promise to execute vengeance, a Christian should therefore **feed his enemy** and quench his thirst—in short, respond to his evil with Christian love. Heaping **burning coals on his head**, along with the first part of [Romans 12:20](#), is a quotation from [Proverbs 25:21–22](#). The coals on the head may refer to a ritual in Egypt in which a person showed his repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head. Helping rather than cursing an enemy may cause him to be ashamed and penitent.²
- d. What is the Lord instructing us to do when we're tempted to take our revenge?
 - i. In the last section of this paragraph (17–21), Paul calls believers to demonstrate sincere love (9) towards those who oppose them. Echoing again the teaching of Jesus ([Matthew 5:38–42](#); *cf.* [1 Thessalonians 5:15](#); [1 Peter 3:9](#)), Paul forbids retaliation (17a; *cf.* v 19a). In its place, he urges a positive response: *Be careful to do what is right* (*lit.* ‘good things’; *cf.* 12:2b) *in the eyes of everybody*. Specifically, the Christian should seek to maintain peaceful relationships with everybody, Christians and non-Christians alike (*cf.* [Proverbs 3:4](#); [2 Corinthians 8:21](#)). Nevertheless, Paul recognizes that our freedom to do so will be limited by the attitudes of others and by our need not to compromise our Christian integrity. Peace with others should

²Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An exposition of the scriptures* (2:490). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

*cf.*compare
*lit.*literally

never be purchased at the price of our Christian convictions and witness. Thus he adds the qualification *as far as it depends on you*.

Paul adds to his second prohibition (19a) an explanation of why such retaliation is unnecessary. We are to remember that we serve a sovereign and just God, a God who has promised to avenge the wrongs of those who are ill-treated in this world (**Deuteronomy 32:35**). We should, therefore, not feel it necessary to take on ourselves the role of avenger, but rather *leave room for God's wrath*. (The Greek does not make clear that the wrath is God's, but this is certainly Paul's meaning.) Paul quotes **Proverbs 25:21–22** to reinforce his plea not to take vengeance. Again, as in v 17, the point is that Christians should substitute for vengeance the doing of good to our enemies. Through such kindness to our enemy, we *will heap burning coals on his head*. This could be a reference to future divine punishment: if the enemy is not moved to repentance by our good deeds, our kindly actions will render God's wrath all the worse. But the fact that it is we, by our good deeds, who bring the burning coals on the enemy suggests rather that Paul is holding out to us the hope that our kindness will stimulate shame and repentance in the enemy. V 21—*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*—is a fitting conclusion to this section (17–21) and, indirectly, to all of verses 3–20.³

7. Read and discuss **1 Corinthians 6:9–11**, focusing on the “before and after” stories of the people in the Corinthian church.
 - a. Allow the people in your group to share some of the details of their personal story and how the Lord has brought them from the “this is the way I used to live and now I think, act and live a different way because of what the Lord's done for me!”
8. Pastor Gary told a funny story about Hank, the road trip friend, who didn't need to stop for a restroom break because he had on pull-ups!
 - a. When your friends, neighbors and family members do or say things according to the standards of the world, are you tempted to say, “Are you wearing pull-ups?”
 - b. Would unbelievers look at you and wonder about your level of Christian maturity?
 - c. What are the characteristics or evidence of a Christian who is maturing in the Lord?
9. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: ask the Holy Spirit to specifically show them the areas in their life where they need to “grow up”; allow the Lord to reshape their thinking and to transform their life in such a way as to demonstrate a real life-change.

³Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Ro 12:9). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.