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# LESSONS FROM CORINTH

ACTS 18 & THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

## COMING TO CORINTH

*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be His holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 CORINTHIANS 1.2

Corinth—

- ▶ Rival to Athens, Corinth was completely destroyed in 146 B.C. by the Roman army
- ▶ Julius Caesar recognized its strategic commercial importance, and in 46 B.C. sent a contingent of freedmen and veterans to the site to rebuild Corinth as a Roman colony
- ▶ By the time the Apostle Paul arrived 100 years later, Corinth was a commercial powerhouse of 750,000 people, two-thirds of whom were slaves; it was the provincial capital of the Roman province of Achaia, and the seat of government for the proconsul, Gallio, before whom Paul would appear on charges brought against him by the Jews

## HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF (OR “HUMAN NATURE IS THE SAME TODAY”)

- ▶ Corinth was an affluent city whose citizens, like us, were working to climb the ladder of social and economic success – “*perhaps no city in the Empire offered so congenial an atmosphere for individual and corporate advancement.*”
- ▶ Corinth was a progressive city; a commercial and cosmopolitan center at the crossroads of the empire, you could be or find anything or anyone in its diverse “anything goes” religious and sexual culture.
- ▶ “*The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by any and all means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled in exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types; in a word, the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.*”

## THE MISSION IN CORINTH

- ▶ Paul has one ambition: that people know “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2.2). That ambition kept him going, no matter what happened.
- ▶ Beaten and incarcerated in Philippi, persecuted and run out of town in Thessalonica and Berea, and dismissed in Athens, Paul moves on to Corinth.
- ▶ As Paul enters Corinth, his senses and his spirit are assaulted by a society addicted to its desires of sex, greed, and self. Lawsuits and litigation, every expression of greed, indulgence and sexual desire—all are on full display, 24/7.
- ▶ As Paul works to support himself and preaches the gospel in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the same cycle of Jewish opposition and abuse repeats itself.

## IS IT WORTH IT?

Did Paul ever wonder, "Is it worth it? Can I make a difference in this place?"

*When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.*

1 CORINTHIANS 2.1-5

- ▶ Paul had one focus as he came to the spiritually dark and depraved Corinth: to proclaim Jesus so that people could experience the transforming power of the Spirit.
- ▶ As Paul was faithful to his (and our) calling to be Christ's witness, "many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized" (Acts 18.8).

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*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

2 CORINTHIANS 5.14-20

## HOW DO WE SEE PEOPLE?

- ▶ God sees the need of people and is motivated by love to respond (John 3.16; Romans 5.8). The Apostle Paul, also, was compelled by Christ's love (5.14): no matter who or what a person was or had done, Christ died for all and anyone could live for him (5.15).
- ▶ Because of the work of Christ, anyone who is “in Christ” is a new creation; they have a new identity and are no longer defined by who or what they have been (5.17).
- ▶ When we can understand this as God's ambition and mission—“reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sin against them” (5.19), then we will see ourselves as responsible for the mission, ministry, and message of reconciliation (5.20). This is the way we show value for the work of Christ (5.21).

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*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision:*

*Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”*

*So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*

ACTS 18.9-11

## HOW GOD SAW CORINTH

► “I have many people in this city.” God brought Paul to Corinth because He wanted “many” Corinthians to be “new creations” in and through the work of Christ. The Apostle Paul was convinced that the gospel would be effective in the extreme sin-culture of Corinth. After he left Corinth, he wrote to the church:

*Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you 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.*

# HOW DO WE SEE—OR DON'T WE?

- ▶ **How do we see people:** as God desires them to be in Christ— or through our own perceptions of their sin and offensiveness to us?
- ▶ **How do we see ourselves:** as called to reconcile people to God— or as having some other primary purpose (or limitation) in life?
- ▶ **How do we see the gospel:** as capable of addressing any sin consequence and making any person a new creation? Or do we, by our lack of action, really believe that some people are beyond the the power of the gospel and some circumstances are so hard and hopeless that they aren't worth the effort?
- ▶ May we not be guilty of *emptying the cross of its power* (1Corinthians 1.17), but may always give ourselves “*fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*” (1 Corinthians 15.58).