

- ***READ I Corinthians 1:10-13*** A simple cursory reading of this first letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians will reveal that this church had a great number of problems. There were any number of issues that Paul could've led with in this letter of admonishment, rebuke, and encouragement, but I don't believe that Paul randomly led with these rebukes of the divided culture that was present within the Corinthian church. I am convinced that Paul led with this particular issue in which he rebuked their divided state and admonished them to seeking a spirit of unity because this aspect of the church's culture had to be addressed and fixed before the rest of the issues could truly be remedied.
- I believe that Paul did this because he knew that if a people are not unified in their purpose and work then those same people will not be able to achieve true success in whatever it is that they might say that they are striving to do. Those same principles that Paul applied to the Corinthian brethren are the same principles that apply to Christians who are joined together in local churches in 2019. If it was true that these brethren needed to be unified, then it is equally as true that we must be unified if we want to accomplish the good work that has been set before us of expanding and strengthening the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth.
- As we continue to consider how it is that we can to grow and excel still more in 2019 as a church family here at Pleasant plains, we are going to use our focus lesson for this month to look at the subject of unity and how it is that we can be a church that is excelling in unity. You've heard me say it before concerning my planned preaching that I am convinced that God will use such efforts in order to help for good work to be done, and I believe that to be the case in regards with this lesson considering that we just finished up five weeks of reading through I Corinthians. This letter was written to a divided church that was in desperate need of unification, and it only makes sense to consider to use what is taught in this letter by the Apostle Paul to establish what excellent unity looks like from a congregational perspective.
- What we will look at this morning will hopefully sound familiar to you if you have been keeping up with the daily Bible reading, and I hope that these considerations might build well upon those readings and meditations so that we all might be admonished and encouraged to grow and excel still more in the unity that is present here in this church. We often express in our public comments and prayers that we are very appreciative for the unity and peace that we have in this group, and I too appreciate and recognize the peace and unity that is seen and felt, but we can do even better when it comes to our focus, purpose, and even interactions with one another that will contribute to not just unity but excellent unity. This excellent unity begins with two foundational points that Paul seeks to emphasize in this letter of First Corinthians.

Learning Excellent Unity From The First Letter To The Corinthians

I. Foundations Of Excellent Unity

A. Recognizing Christ As Our Standard & Foundation

1. True and excellent unity must begin with a singular foundation and standard being determined, and these brethren were struggling because they had allowed for that foundation to not be singular but differed and divided. They had allowed for their standard to be whoever it was that had taught them and brought them to the true. There were some who claimed to be followers of Paul, others of Apollos, others followers of Cephas (Peter), and then there were some who were striving to simply follow Christ. (**I Corinthians 1:12**) How could this group be unified in their work and purpose if they couldn't even agree on who was going to serve as their standard? How were they going to go anywhere together if they couldn't even agree on who they were to follow?
2. Therefore, it was Paul's understanding of the situation that led him to make sure that he first addressed these issues of division so that he might unify this group upon the same standard of

Jesus Christ crucified as the power and wisdom of God. (**I Corinthians 1:24**) These brethren had been looking to men as their standard, but they needed to recognize that Jesus alone was the one who had been crucified for their sins. He alone had been risen from the dead. He alone is worthy to serve as the foundation of faith for Christians. (**I Corinthians 3:10,11**) Paul fully understood the importance to only build upon a foundation of Jesus, and that is what he did whenever it was that he had opportunity to teach, and he expected for others to do the same.

3. If these brethren would lay aside any other standard and any foundation other than Christ then that would have done wonders for their unification. They would no longer find themselves divided on the most foundational level, but instead they would be able to move forward together and in the same direction. That same truth remains for us even today. If we find ourselves appealing to different standards or trying to build on different foundations other than Christ then we will never find true unity because we will all be going different directions and in different ways. We must accept Christ alone as our standard and foundation if we want to experience excellent unity within this church, but we must also be united in our motivation.

B. Doing Everything Through Love

1. Towards the end of the letter, the Apostle Paul gives attention to how it is that the Corinthians were failing in making sure that they were using their talents in the appropriate way. They were seeing their talents as a badge of pride and honor and seeing themselves as better than others. Paul emphasized to these brethren that all parts of the body are necessary (**I Corinthians 12**), and he then goes on to stress that the greatest acts in the world will mean nothing if they are not done from and through a heart that is motivated by love. In **I Corinthians 13:1-3**, Paul clearly states that speaking in tongues is worthless if it is not done out of love. Prophesying and revealing mysteries does nothing if it isn't done out of love. Feeding the poor, and even giving up our lives will mean nothing before God if they are not done out of love. No matter what we do, it must be done through love for God and others.
2. Additionally, Paul goes on to describe what type of behavior we will exhibit if we are people who are truly motivated by love. (**I Corinthians 13:4-7**) These truths were applicable to the Corinthians, and they are just as applicable to us in our day. We will be people who are patient, kind, not jealous, and not prideful or arrogant. We will be people who are kind and friendly. We will not demand that our way be done because it is our way. We will be people who are not looking to argue or fight. We will be a forgiving and long-suffering people. We will reject unrighteousness and only rejoice in the truth. We will be patient, giving the benefit of the doubt, and enduring through every situation. If I am the loving person that God expects for me to be then I am going to be a person that possesses these attributes. Love must be foundational to who I am as a person who claims to follow Jesus Christ.
3. If we will all be committed to living and behaving in this manner then I am convinced that Paul was convinced that even these divided and quarreling people could find unity and peace among themselves. Therefore, we must understand and accept that these two mindsets are the foundations of excellent unity. For the remainder of our time, we will look at different instructions given by Paul that I need to personally take responsibility for so that I can contribute to an atmosphere of excellent unity no matter what local church I might find myself in...including this church here at Pleasant Plains.

II. I Can Contribute To Excellent Unity By:

A. Being Spiritually Minded & Spiritually Focused

1. We are all part of a spiritual family, and therefore it is quite logical and reasonable to think that we would be able to find success working with one another by making sure that we are all spiritually minded and spiritually focused. Paul encourages the Corinthians to be spiritually

mindful all throughout **chapter 2** as he stresses to them that he came to them only with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him being crucified. He had no concern with making himself look superior through speech or wisdom. **(2:1,2)** To Him, it was all about Jesus Christ

2. This was Paul's focus in his teaching of the Corinthians because he wanted to be sure that their faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but simply on the power of God. **(2:5)** If these brethren were able to found their faith only on Jesus then they could come to *"know the things freely given to us by God."* **(2:12)** Remember that those who are fleshly minded and wise according to the world don't see the Gospel for what it truly is. They simply see it as foolishness, and will perish in what is actually their own foolishness. **(1:18,21)** But for us who are willing to live with this spiritual mindset that allows God's Word to change us into what He desires for us to be, we are then able to live by this holy standard.
3. Further, this spiritual mindset helps for us to see the importance of making sure that we aren't living simply for this life. The wisdom of the world tells us to get what we can here and now in this life, but those of us who are spiritually minded see things in a different perspective. We are not pleasure focused, but we are spiritually focused in that we are making sure that we are prepared for what comes after this life. We believe and behave in this manner because we do believe that something comes next. We look to what Paul says in **I Corinthians 15** concerning the resurrection and the confidence we can have in the fact that it is coming, and this leads to our willingness to overcome any temptation or trial of this world so that we will be raised to glory on that day. If each and every one of us, which begins with me, will adopt this spiritual mindset and spiritual focus then we will all be moving in the same direction, with the same purpose, and with the same expectation. In doing this, we can begin to see excellent unity among ourselves.

B. Purging Sin From My Life

1. Developing this spiritual mindset and hope naturally leads me to doing something else that is imperative to being unified with my other church members, and that is making sure that I am keeping my life free from sin by purging it from myself. We mentioned that this church had a great number of issues, and one of the more serious issues was the fact that they had ongoing sin within their number. In **I Corinthians 5 & 6**, Paul rebukes and admonishes these brethren for becoming arrogant through their unwillingness to mourn over the sexual immorality that was being committed among them that a man had taken his father's wife for himself. **(5:1,2)**
2. Paul goes on to say that these brethren needed to reprimand this man for his sin and do nothing that might indicate that they condoned such behavior such as sharing a common friendly meal with him. **(5:9,11)** They were in need of cleaning out the leaven so that they may be a new lump of unleavened dough. **(5:7)** Yet, this purging of sin from the midst of the church wasn't only a group activity. No, this cleansing of sin was something that needed to be done on a personal level so that the group wouldn't have to experience strife and take such collective action.
3. In **6:9-11**, Paul states that these individuals were to be different in regards to their character and conduct as to who they were before Christ and who they were now in Christ. Paul reminds them that those who were unrighteous would not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Those who are unrighteous would be those who fall into the categories they are mentioned within **vv.9,10**, but that was no longer the type of people that they were because *"you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."* **(6:11)** The clear implication is that they were not to return to this type of living. They were to purge these actions and mindsets from their lives, so that they could dwell together in peace and righteousness, and those same principles apply to us. If we will free our lives of sin through the putting away of fleshly mindsets and embracing what we have received through Christ, then we can be a people who are excellently unified in holiness and righteousness and we won't force our brethren to take action against our sin.

C. Respecting The Opinions & Consciences Of Others

1. Being a divided people, it shouldn't surprise us that these brethren had issues when it came to dealing with the differing opinions and consciences that were among them. Paul does an excellent job in this letter by showing how it is that we ought to approach the differing opinions and consciences of our brethren. This approach can be found in **chapter 7** as Paul is giving instructions concerning marriage. In **v.7**, Paul states, *"Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that."* Paul is speaking towards his ability to remain unmarried. His point is that he wishes that all men could do as he was doing for the sake of the kingdom and the good that can be done without the responsibility of a spouse, but he also recognizes that this is only his opinion and that others don't have to follow suit. Paul further expounds on how this is truly only his own personal opinion in **7:25-28**. Notice how Paul simply states his opinion and then allows for the listener to do with it what he or she will. This is the proper way to handle such things.
2. Paul goes on in **chapter 8** to further expound on this teaching by referencing foods that were sacrificed to idols. Corinth was a highly idolized city, and this certainly was an issue that these brethren had to deal with. It was Paul's teaching that those in Christ ought to recognize that food is food regardless of who it might have been cooked as an offering to (**8:4-6**) However, there were others who might have been younger or weaker in the faith or from that background who had a conscience against eating such foods. In this case, Paul teaches that we ought to respect their consciences and not put them in a compromising position in which they might be encouraged to go against their conscience when they are truly not ready to do so. (**8:9-13**) This means that I am not going to invite people who might have an opinion or conscience to participate in something that I know they would not feel comfortable doing. No matter how silly a thing might be in my mind, I need to respect them and not put them in that compromising position.
3. At the same time, I must make sure that I am not abusing my position by binding my opinion or conscience on that of others. Paul does a good job of hitting both sides of this discussion within this letter, and he addresses this side in **10:24-31**. I should not be so arrogant to think that my opinion or conscience is the only way to go about doing something to the point that I try to force my opinion or conscience on others. There is nothing wrong with discussing differing opinions, but we must not cross over to where we are trying to force ours upon others. If others are going to be kind and considerate and not force me to go against my conscience then I would well to make sure that I don't turn things around and bind my opinion or conscience on them. This discussion works both ways, and if we want to be a people who work together in excellent unity then we must be willing to respect the opinions and consciences of others from both perspectives.

D. Doing My Part & Letting Others Do Their Part

1. Finally, these divided brethren could mend their relationships with one another by striving to figure out their part, doing it, and allowing others to do theirs. Anyone who has been a part of a local church knows just how much work there is to be done. This was true within the church in Corinth, and it continues to be true today. Now, things might have looked a bit different at Corinth with the presence of miraculous spiritual gifts (**12:1-11**), but the illustration given by Paul continues to remain applicable to us. That fitting example is that of the body and how it functions.
2. In **I Corinthians 12:14-31**, Paul helps the brethren to recognize that their part matters by reminding them that every one of the many parts of the human body matters. The foot is just as much a part of the body as the hand. The ear is just as necessary as the eye. Any one of these things missing would cause for something to be lacking. Additionally, let's notice that the foot can't do what the hand does, and the eye cannot hear as the ear does. This means that different parts of the body play different roles, and those different roles are necessary to help the entire

body function. Even those “lesser” parts are very necessary and help things to run as they ought.

3. Now, let’s take that illustration and apply it to the church. Paul says that just as there are many parts of the human body, so are there many parts in Christ’s body. *“Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?” (I Corinthians 12:27-30)* Notice these conclusions that we draw from what Paul has said:

- a) Each of us have been different gifts that help us to fulfill the different roles.
- b) Each of these gifts are needed and useful within the local church.
- c) Not everyone can do everything, but everyone can do something.
- d) Everyone is to do something for the building up of the members of the body.
- e) It is important for me to figure out my role and that I do it well!

4. Not only must I figure out my role and make sure I do it well, but I must allow for others to figure out their roles so that they can do them well and contribute to the building up of the body. Again, not a single one of us is excellent at every single aspect of the work that goes on here. We might be capable of doing a little bit of everything, but that doesn’t mean that we are actually good or effective at it. Therefore, we need to let those who are excellent at those roles participate and contribute by fulfilling those roles. Because when this doesn’t happen and I start putting my nose in other people’s work (not because it isn’t getting done but because I think it has to be done my way or that I have to be involved in every single thing that takes place here at this church) then there are a few things that usually take place:

- a) My attention to the work of others often leaves my work without the proper attention.
- b) When my work isn’t given the proper attention then others have to pick up my slack.
- c) My doing the work of others robs them of the opportunity to contribute to the work.

5. I must be sure that I discipline myself to recognize and understand that I am first and foremost a servant of my fellow brother and sister. Everything I do must be because I love them (**13**) and I want to see them encouraged and built up in their service to God. Anything I do that does not portray that as being my mindset and purpose is a complete failure on my part, and I must do better if I want to truly contribute to excellent unity among the church family that I am a part of.

The brethren in Corinth had a lot going for them considering they had been called out of the darkness of that city in the light that was of Jesus Christ, but that doesn’t mean that they had it all figure out. They still had some areas in which they struggled and those troubled areas led to disunity among the church. Yet, through Paul’s writings and our consideration of them, we can come to know how it is that they could remedy their problems and we can come to know how it is that we can help for our own unity to be improved upon to the degree that it becomes excellent unity. We, at this church, are striving for excellence in all that we do, and it is my hope that our considerations this morning will lead us all to be able to contribute even more so to excellent unity here at Pleasant Plains. It is all about the Lord as our standard and foundation, and it is all about our love for one another shining through in all that we do.