

**Winter Series III 25 July 2021**  
**1 Corinthians 6, 9-14 (15-18) 19-20**  
**“A blessing for this world”**

On the internet: <https://youtu.be/BXXfmi3uzsg>

Dear sisters and brothers,

When reading the letters of Paul, I find it immensely helpful to research the historical background to the congregation that he writes to. Fortunately, Google has made this process a lot easier. One has to sift through a lot of results, but with time one starts recognizing sites that are well researched. So, a tip to all of you: Read up the historical background. It will give you a different perspective on what Paul is writing about.

The reason is that Paul did not write for the sake of writing, and never because he was bored and had nothing else to do. Furthermore, his letters are not theological essays, written behind a desk. No, all of them were written to congregations that he had founded or at least visited, or intended to visit. Acts shows us Paul as someone who made an effort to understand the people that he was preaching to. That is why each letter has themes specific to the congregation, its situation and challenges.

Today's text is from the letter to the Corinthians. I will quickly put it into its historical context. Corinth was the capital city of the Roman province Achaia, and at that stage about five times as big as Athens. It was a port city, strategically placed on the narrow land strip, Isthmus, servicing a harbour on each side. The population of about hundred thousand was cosmopolitan, with a large portion of slaves and workers and a small elite of wealthy business men and women and Roman officials.

Prostitution in various forms was part of all Roman cities, and much more intense in harbour towns. In Roman culture it was not only the right of a man to go to a prostitute - female or male - it was also a sign of dominance. Slaves and poor people were the subjects of prostitution, the working and upper class were the clients. Corinth was known for its promiscuity, to such an extent that “fornication” was called “corinthianising”, and a “Corinthians girl” was synonym for a prostitute.

Corinth had a small Jewish population with a synagogue, which followed the Jewish culture and rituals and must have been a stark contrast to the rest of society.

The congregation that Paul is writing to had between 40 and 100 members, also

representing the cultural spread of the city. It had started through the Synagogue (Acts 18) but quickly separated from there, attracting non-Jewish Corinthians. Christianity did not reach Corinth through Paul (Acts 18, 9 states that the Lord says that he has many followers in the city), but the ministry of Paul of almost two years led to the formalisation of the Christian congregation. Due to the multi-cultural nature of the congregation there was no common heritage on which to build. The two letters are a good indication of the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians to establish some guidelines and direction for what it means to be a Christian in Corinth.

Our text today, 1 Cor 6:9-20, focuses on life habits and life style.

*“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 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.*

*12 ‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say – but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’ – but I will not be mastered by anything. 13 You say, ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.’ The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’ 17 But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*

*18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. 19 Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.”*

The promiscuous life style of the free people of Corinth was very appealing to the population, but appalling to the Jewish community. Paul is also appalled by it, while some new Christians clearly find it appealing. “I have the right to do anything” was not only the slogan of a free Roman citizen - it also was used by Corinthian Christians, set free by Christ. It reflects the self-understanding of being a dominator, above others. Verses 9 and 10 describe accepted practises of free Roman citizens of Corinth. (Some of you were this!, Paul states.)

Against “I have the right to do anything”, Paul responds: “But is it good? Is it beneficial?”

Whereas in other congregations Paul has to deal with the clashes between the Christian Faith and Jewish custom and rituals, such as circumcision and celebration of Jewish feasts, here he addresses the conflict between Christian faith and Roman, or more specific, Corinthian culture. He does not argue with Jewish law and rituals, but with the question: What honours Christ?

He does not focus on “Set free by Christ” (Which he does when speaking to Christians with Jewish background, as in Gal 5, 1-6) but on “United with the Lord”. The melting pot of the congregation has a common identity: Belonging to Christ, being part of his body. The guiding question now is: Which actions honour Christ, and which ones not?

In this particular passage he then focuses on sexuality and the way it is practised in Corinth, and states: This does not honour the body of Christ!

A large portion of the Corinthian population consisted of freed slaves. A freed slave would proudly state: I own myself! I own my body! I belong to myself! Paul uses this and says to Christians across the spectrum of slaves, freed or free Roman Citizens: You are *not* your own. You were bought at a price. Honour God with your bodies!

As I was preparing for today, I asked myself: What would Paul have written to us in South Africa, two weeks after the eruption of the worst unrest in decades? Based on his approach I want to ask: How can we as Christians glorify the Lord in this situation? How can we honour him with our bodies? The culture of lawlessness is wide spread. It has been lived out by political leadership that acted as if they were untouchable, above the law; by people of power who looted the state and its resources. The violent looting of the past days took this same attitude to the grass root level.

What are the norms, values and culture of our South African society?

We have a culture of non-respect for the dignity of fellow human beings. The almost thirty thousand murders reported annually are the most visible and brutal form of this disrespect. Deep rooted racism and prejudice can be found all over. “Those people” is used to degrade communities, race groups or whoever I find irritating.

Although one can link the unrest to the divided and ineffective ruling party, the underlying country wide poverty and unemployment will remain a fertile soil for future unrest. We have learned to live with this severe inequality and accept it as normal, or see it as someone else’s matter to solve. Just as the Corinthians

accepted their own way of life as normal, many of us have just accepted that this is South Africa.

In my (lengthy) introduction I stated that promiscuity was wide spread and part of accepted culture in the Roman Empire, and that Corinth was extreme in this regard.

Injustice and inequality, corruption and poor government are wide spread across the globe - but our country surpasses most others.

For that reason I believe that we as Christians in South Africa are called to make a difference by no longer just accepting that it is normal, by not being party to it, but by actively working against it.

Into this situation I hear the gospel (Mt 5, 13-16) where Jesus says: You (my followers) are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. I hear the epistle reading from Eph 5, 8-15 challenging us to live as children of light, that expose the fruitless deeds of darkness, and find out what pleases the Lord and do it.

Last week I spoke about us being part of a family, which is called by God. I shared that in many areas unrest was prevented because whole communities stood up and said: Not in our name.

Now that things have calmed down, we should not revert back to our old habits and culture of accepting the wrongs. We should repent where we are actively part of the problem.

We are set free by Christ, so that we can honour him with our bodies, our being.

Did the 40 to 100 Christians in Corinth have an impact on the 100 000 others? It is difficult to say. At the time of Paul’s writing it was however clear that the 100 000 citizens had a massive impact on the 100 Christians. Paul wrote to say: Be influenced by Christ, by the Holy Spirit, not by society.

Do I have hope for South Africa? If we expect the change to come from government and politicians, I have no hope. But if we as Christians dare to live what we believe, honour God with our whole being, and work together for goodness, righteousness and truth(Eph 5,8), then I do have hope!

“Live as children of light for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.” Ephesians 5, 8b&9, Watchword for this week.

Amen

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