

An Overview of 1 Corinthians: Confronting Conflict with the Cross
1 Corinthians
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Introduction

This morning we are going to be beginning our study through Paul's First Letter to the Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians is a long letter, but is much deserving of our attention. This morning I am going to be introducing the letter. There is so much in 1 Corinthians that is worthy of our time. It is my intention to cover the book in its entirety verse by verse. My goal this morning is to get the big picture of the letter as it stands as a complete unit. It is my position that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians with the purpose of reestablishing the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the center of the life of the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church was a mess and the root of their many ailments was their devaluation of the Gospel. This is why the subtitle for this morning's sermon is *Confronting Conflict with the Cross*. This is what 1 Corinthians is all about. In fact, if I were to give 1 Corinthians itself a subtitle it would be *1 Corinthians: Confronting Conflict with the Cross*. My reason for choosing this subtitle will hopefully become a bit more clear as we move along.

Getting the Big Picture

Setting the Stage

In an attempt to get the overarching big picture of 1 Corinthians we need to consider a few items of introduction. First of all, it is important to know that 1 Corinthians is a letter. 1 Corinthians was not written by a monk in a monastery detached from the hustle and bustle of life in Corinth. 1 Corinthians is a passionate letter between a church planter/apostle, Paul, and his church. The fact that 1 Corinthians is a personal letter is evidenced in the first two verses of the letter. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:1-2 with me.

Paul, called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and our brother Sosthenes. To God's church at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called as saints.

These first two verses reflect the standard greeting in letters from the ancient world. If 1 Corinthians was written according to the standard form of modern day letters, vss. 1-2 would look something like this.

Dear Corinthian Church (those who sanctified in Christ Jesus and called as saints),

I, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by God's will, and Sosthenes (our brother) send you our love...

You must understand that 1 Corinthians is a passionate letter, a personal document. Paul is not here writing to a group of people with whom he is unfamiliar. No, he knows the Corinthians quite well and they know him quite well. In fact, as can be attested from the book of Acts, Paul knew them intimately. Turn with me to Acts 18:1-17. It is here in Acts 18 where Luke briefly records Paul's ministry at Corinth.

1 After this, he left from Athens and went to Corinth, 2 where he found a Jewish man named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, 3 and being of the same

occupation, stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. 4 He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.

5 When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching the message and solemnly testified to the Jews that the Messiah is Jesus. 6 But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his clothes and told them, “Your blood is on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” 7 So he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed the Lord, along with his whole household; and many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized.

9 Then the Lord said to Paul in a night vision, “Don’t be afraid, but keep on speaking and don’t be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you, because I have many people in this city.” 11 And he stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

12 While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack against Paul and brought him to the judge’s bench. 13 “This man,” they said, “persuades people to worship God contrary to the law!”

14 And as Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of a crime or of moral evil, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you Jews. 15 But if these are questions about words, names, and your own law, see to it yourselves. I don’t want to be a judge of such things.” 16 So he drove them from the judge’s bench. 17 Then they all seized Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the judge’s bench. But none of these things concerned Gallio.

This is Luke’s record of Paul’s ministry in Corinth. This all takes place on Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul had plans on bringing the Gospel up to the province of Bithynia.¹ However, God had different plans. He wanted Paul to take the Gospel west, to the Roman province of Macedonia. As is recorded in Acts 16 Paul did so and was pretty much chased from Philippi to Thessalonica to Berea and then finally chased out of Macedonia down Athens, which was in the province of Achaia. Paul did not stay in Athens too long, because he had his eyes set on Achaia’s most prominent city, Corinth.² Upon his arrival in Corinth, Paul spent a great deal of time reasoning with Jews in the synagogue. The Jews ended up rejecting Paul’s Gospel. Paul then turned his attention to the Gentiles of Corinth and the Lord caused the Gospel to spread throughout the city. In fact, as Luke makes clear in Acts 18:9-10, God spoke to Paul, encouraging him to stay in Corinth longer than he had intended (at least that is how Luke seems to communicate it). God’s reason for having Paul extend his ministry in Corinth was “because I have many people in this city” (vs. 10). God ensured Paul of two things; 1. that He would keep Paul safe, and 2. that He was going to save some people in Corinth. Paul obeyed God’s order and stayed in Corinth for an entire year and a half.

We do not know the details of Paul’s lengthy visit in Corinth other than what is recorded in Acts 18. All that can be said is that Paul’s ministry there was a mixed bag. As is made clear in Acts 18 Paul’s ministry, although fruitful, was met with hostility on the part of the Jews. Notice that Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. This is an important point. Paul’s visit to Corinth was not a short-term missions trip. I have been an elder at Sovereign Grace Fellowship since October 10, 2008. I have been an elder now for a year and a half and a week. This may

¹See <http://net.bible.org/map.php?map=jp2> for some good maps to help you navigate the geography of the ancient world.

²By Paul’s time, Athens was no longer the glorious city that it once was. Corinth had taken its place as the Capital of Achaia.

help you get an idea of how long Paul's stay was at Corinth. He was there for about the same length of time that I have been an elder here.

Why is this important? Paul was no stranger to the Corinthian church. Not only did Paul plant their church, he lived among them for an entire year and a half. Paul actually refers to himself in 1 Corinthians as their father in Christ Jesus.

For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (1 Corinthians 4:15; ESV)

Paul did not write this letter as dispassionate, uncaring academic. He knew the Corinthian's well. He lived with them, communed with them for a year and a half. And something must be said about the sort of community that they enjoyed in the ancient world. Today we live in a disconnected society. This is one of the results of mass transportation. We have the ability, because of the many technological advances in regard to transportation and communication, to create greater connections with people living in California, Britain, Wyoming, and India than with our next door neighbors. I always feel a bit confused as I stare at Moe's shiny head on Skype when I think about the fact that I wouldn't even be able to recognize the face of those who live in the apartment right beneath me if I were to run into them in Walmart!

The other day while I was studying at Starbucks a man came walking in with his (I am guessing) 12 year old son. They seemed quite happy to be together. They went up to the counter, ordered their drinks, and then sat down across the room from me. They were right in my line of sight. As soon as they sat down the father pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, flipped it open and began to text. They literally sat there for about 30-40 minutes and without saying a word to each other. As the dad texted his head off his boy sat there in silence. I noticed that the chairs were positioned in such a way that their knees were touching and yet there wasn't one ounce of dialogue. And why? Because dad had his head buried in his phone. This may have been an isolated event. He may have been an excellent father who had pressing matters to attend to on his phone. I don't know. But the fact is that this is a common occurrence in today's culture.

Why do I bring all this up? Because this was not how things went in Paul's day. Paul didn't block everyone in Corinth out while texting Peter in Jerusalem,

"Yo Pete! Just got me a latte at that corner coffee shop on the east side of Corinth. Ttyl. Peace out, Paul."

There was no immediate connection to the outside world as there is today. Even what we nowadays refer to as 'snail mail' would have been mindbogglingly, yea impossibly, efficient to anyone living prior to the 20th Century. What does this mean? Paul shared not just his values and his time with the Corinthians; he shared his very life with them. They knew each other intimately. He was not somewhere else while he was in Corinth, as we are oftentimes not where we are (we are often so dislocated—our physical bodies may be where we are while our minds and thoughts are wherever we are on the web or on our phone). His relationships were confined to the sphere in which he lived and worked. This means that his relationships were more deep than wide, just the opposite of us. So when you read 1 Corinthians, you must read it as a passionate letter between an apostle and his beloved church. They were intimate friends, brothers in Christ. They were his spiritual children. He loved them and they loved him.

When you read 1 Corinthians you must understand that it is an emotionally charged letter. This is can even be attested by looking at Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Consider the words of Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:1-4.

In fact, I made up my mind about this: not to come to you on another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, then who will cheer me other than the one hurt? I wrote this very thing so that when I came I wouldn't have pain from those who ought to give me joy, because I am confident about all of you that my joy is yours. For out of an extremely troubled and anguished heart I wrote to you with many tears—not that you should be hurt, but that you should know the abundant love I have for you.

Paul references this difficult and painful letter again in 2 Corinthians 7:8-11. Scholars debate whether this tearful (or painful) letter is a reference to 1 Corinthians or to some other letter that Paul wrote them. I lean toward it being a reference to 1 Corinthians but do realize that it could be a reference to another letter that Paul wrote. *Either way, this passage reveals Paul's heart for the Corinthians.* Whether this painful letter that Paul is talking about is a reference to 1 Corinthians or not, there is no disguising the fact that 1 Corinthians is a heavy letter. Paul says many difficult things in 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote with tears—he wrote with brokenness.

What Prompted Paul to Write 1 Corinthians?

This leads us to ask the question, "What Prompted Paul to Write 1 Corinthians?" If it is an emotionally charged letter, what was going on that made Paul sit back and decide that it was time to write a letter to them? There are actually 2 things which prompted Paul to write 1 Corinthians. **The first is found in 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.**

Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by members of Chloe's household, that there are quarrels among you.

The reason why I point you to this verse is to prove that Paul was prompted to write (at least part of) 1 Corinthians in response to a report that he had received from 'members of Chloe's household.' Chloe was most likely a prominent business woman in the church. David Garland explains that the members of her household "may describe members of her family (relatives or children...) her retainers, or her slaves..."³ He then goes on to suggest that whoever these 'members' were, "Paul regards them as reliable witnesses and assumes that the Corinthians would recognize that their testimony carried weight and could not be lightly dismissed."⁴ These members informed Paul of the instability of the church in Corinth. The Corinthian church was being rent asunder. Their lack of unity had everything to do with their unbiblical view of men—they put the leaders of the church on a pedestal so much so that the church was fragmenting around the different leaders of the church. Paul deals with this issue in chapters 1-4. Chloe's people also informed Paul of some other issues that were plaguing the church. Paul deals with these other issues throughout the rest of the letter.

³ David Garland, *1 Corinthians*; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 44.

⁴ Ibid.

The second thing which prompted Paul to write 1 Corinthians is found in 7:1. Here Paul says,

“About the things you wrote:...”

This is a clue that the Corinthians had written a letter to Paul in which they asked him a series of questions. Paul takes these questions up and answers them one by one all the way from Chapter 7 to middle part of Chapter 16. Often times Paul gives a tip off that he is addressing a question raised in their letter (to him) when he says, “About...” or “Now about”. You see this in 7:1 (see the verse above), 8:1 (About food sacrificed to idols...), 12:1 (About matters of the spirit...), and 16:1 (Now about the collection of the saints).

In light of this it can be said that 1 Corinthians is comprised of Paul’s reaction to reports that he had received from the members of Chloe’s house and Paul’s answers to the questions asked by the Corinthians in a letter they had sent him. This is what prompted Paul to write 1 Corinthians. He had every reason to know that they were in need of both rebuke and instruction. He took up his stylus to write to the Corinthians with both a heavy hand and heavy heart.

What Was Paul’s Purpose in Writing 1 Corinthians?

The tendency when you read 1 Corinthians is to think that Paul was just randomly dealing with different issues. 1 Corinthians, if not examined close enough, almost reads as if he had ADHD and just went wherever his little rabbit trails led him. Look at all the different topics which Paul brings up in this letter.

- Chapters 1-4: Rebukes the church for dividing over leadership
- Chapter 5: Rebukes the church for tolerating incest in the church
- Chapter 6:1-11: Rebukes the church for suing each other
- Chapter 6:12-20: Rebukes the church for engaging in prostitution
- Chapter 7: Deals with the topic of marriage and divorce
- Chapters 8-10: Deals with the topic of meat sacrificed to idols/rebukes the theologically mature for not giving up their rights for the sake of their brethren
- Chapter 11:2-16: Deals with the topic head coverings in worship
- Chapter 11:17-34: Deals with the topic of the Lord’s Supper/rebukes the rich in the church for hoarding all the food for themselves while the poor go hungry
- Chapters 12-14: Deals with the topic of spiritual gifts/rebukes the church for thinking themselves more superior based on their use of the gifts
- Chapter 15: Deals with the topic of the resurrection/sternly warns the church to straighten out their heretical view of the resurrection of the dead
- Chapter 16:12-13: Deals with the topic of collecting money for the poor saints in Jerusalem
- Chapter 16:14:-22: Gives closing exhortations and a benediction.

Looking at this outline of the book, it seems as if Paul were something of a scatter brain. He jumps from topic to topic to topic. However, I do believe that there is one main purpose for which Paul wrote this letter. I have titled this introduction *Confronting Conflict with the Cross*. This is exactly what Paul was seeking to do in 1 Corinthians—he was seeking to help the Corinthian church heal from her many many many ailments. The medicine that he used to heal this sick Corinthian’s was the Gospel. ***Paul’s purpose was to ground the Corinthians in the***

Gospel. Paul knew that this was the root of their many problems. Unlike many counselors out there, Paul did not focus on symptoms; he focused on the root of their problem.⁵

Paul went to every length to demonstrate for the Corinthians how spiritually backwards they were. They were a divisive community—they were a wreck. It is not as if Paul had nothing to praise them for (just see 1:4-9). However, from the get-go (from 1:10 on) Paul was on the offensive. He took pains to elaborate the waywardness of their condition. However, the way he went about dealing with their condition was not by addressing their problems head-on. He knew that their problems are not primarily behavioral. He knew that their problems most definitely resulted from an unbiblical view of the Gospel.

Unlike other churches in the ancient world, the church in Corinth experienced wide acceptance in the culture of Corinth. The city of Corinth was something of a melting pot, it was extremely diverse. It was not much different from modern day America. There were all sorts of pagan God's being worshipped and this diversity was celebrated. Garland lists many of the gods/goddesses which were worshiped in Corinth:

“Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Asclepius, Athena Chalinitus, Demeter and Kore, Dionysus, Ephesian Artemis, Hera Acraea, Hermes/Mercury, Jupiter Capitolinus, Poseidon/Neptune, Tyche, Fortuna, and Zeus. Egyptian cults, such as the worship of Isis, also were practice.”⁶ And on top of all of this was the imperial cult (Emperor worship).

It was an easy thing to profess Jesus as your Lord and savior in Corinth. Christianity was accepted so long as you were not too radical about it. Just like in America. It is one thing to profess the name of Jesus, it is another to explain who this Jesus is and what He taught. As Francis Schaeffer so helpfully points out in *Escape from Reason*, the name of Jesus, devoid of the biblical content associated with His name, is the most scary word in the modern world. And why? Because when it stands as an ‘undefined banner’—when emptied of all its biblical value—it can mean anything to anyone.⁷ In a cultural which accepts the mere name of Jesus, the temptation of the church is to empty it of its biblical content to make it more acceptable in the public square. If the church continues in this pattern, the culture ends up dumping more content into the name of Jesus than does the word of God. It is at this very place where the church begins to lose any sort of prophetic or redemptive voice in the culture. And this is what happened in Corinth.

And as often happens when the culture is initially accepting of the church—when the church feels comfortable in the world, she always has the tendency to only be strong on those points with which the culture agrees and then to fall back in cowardice on those points with which the culture disagrees. The primary problem with the Corinthians was that they were letting the culture, as opposed to the Gospel of Christ, rule their lives. Garland explains the situation quite well;

⁵ Here Gary S. Shogren helpfully suggests that the core issue of division in Corinth had nothing to do with doctrine and everything to do with prestige. He says, “The Corinthians did not divide up over doctrine, but over prestige. It was Paul, not the Corinthians, who argued that their problem was at heart theological—that people who acted in that way were babies, not grownups; were foolish, not wise; were thinking like the world, not thinking through the perspective of the cross.” Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corinthians*; Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), introduction.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* in *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 257-260.

In this letter, Paul addresses the issue of the church's identity over against its cultural surroundings and seeks to stake out firm boundaries. The problem was not that the church was in Corinth but that too much of Corinth was in the church (Fee 1987: 4). He seeks to disarm the warring factions, to bolster the sense of their common union in Christ, and to widen the boundaries between the church and its surrounding culture.⁸

The Corinthian's ties with those outside the church were just as strong as their ties with those inside the church. They had completely adopted the Corinthian's scale of evaluation. Everything for them was evaluated on the basis of persona, superiority, competition, external appearances, and stage presence. Perception was everything. This was their measuring stick, and they adopted it from Corinth. Corinth was a city that was all about status. It was a land of opportunity where anyone could climb to the top. However, to get to the top one had to be a self-asserting schmoozer.⁹

If a man wanted to get anywhere in Corinthian society he had to promote himself—set himself forward without a concern for how it affected others. This, of course, cuts at the very heart of the righteousness of the Gospel. Jesus set forth an example of humility (God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted—Matthew 23:12), greatness through service as opposed to self-promotion (the greatest among you will be your servant—Matthew 23:11), living through dying as opposed to living through seeking a place of prominence in this world (whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it—Luke 9:24). Instead of

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Anthony C. Thisselton clearly describes Paul's purpose for writing in light of the cultural condition of Corinth in antiquity. "...the topics addressed in 1 Corinthians do not represent an almost random set of pastoral and ethical problems in relation to which Paul adopts a merely reactive stance, but that a 'systematic and coherent' dimension characterizes both theological themes in Corinth and Paul's reproclamation of grace, the cross, and resurrection instantiated and actualized in terms of these contingent problems. *Nevertheless I now perceive how this theological misperception combined with the seductive infiltration into the Christian church of cultural attitudes derived from secular or non-Christian Corinth as a city. Concerns about self-promotion, the psychological insecurity generated by status inconsistency, competitive pragmatism, and the radical pluralism which we have identified with Dave Harvey's 'postmodern mood' of the social construction of a 'virtual' reality, all encouraged concerns about 'high status' as 'people of the Spirit who were gifted' within a Christian subculture with its own autonomous value system.*" (emphasis his). Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 40.

Garland issues an equally helpful statement. "The implications of this backdrop for understanding the problems that beset the Corinthian church should not be underestimated. Few Christians could have been unaffected by the dominant culture surrounding them., even if they assimilated its values only subliminally. Most, if not all, of the problems that Paul addresses were hatched from the influence of this setting. Values that were antithetical to the message of the cross—particularly those related to honor and status so basic to the Greco-Roman social system, in which power manifesting itself in ruthlessness and self-advancement is thought to be the only sensible course—percolated into the church, destroying its fellowship and its Christian witness as some members sought to balance civic norms with Christian norms. Secular wisdom—which reflected the code of conduct of the social elites, who jostled one another for power, prestige, and popularity—had its hold on members of the church. Its values played havoc on Paul's attempt to build a community based on love, selflessness, and the equal worth of every member. Corinthian society was riddled by competitive individualism, and this ethos spilled over into the relationships in the church as wealthier members competed for followers. Socially pretentious and self-important individuals appear to have dominated the church. It is likely that they flaunted their symbols of status, wisdom, influence, and family pedigree and looked down on others of lesser status. They appear to have wanted to preserve the social barriers of class and status that permeated their social world but were nullified in the cross of Christ. For some, the Christian community had become simply another arena to compete for status according to the societal norms. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 6.

washing the feet of the lowest of all (John 13:1-11), they only saw people as a stepping stool to greater and greater self-advancement. They would climb over anybody and everybody—they would push anyone out of the way—ff their public reputation was on the line.

Paul wrote with the attempt of urging the Corinthians to swap the yard stick they had inherited from their culture with the Gospel yard-stick. They had come to a point where everything was evaluated and measured in terms of competition, perception, and self-advancement. This reality is so clearly seen in almost every single verse in 1 Corinthians. Consider the following with me: **1.** The Corinthians measured the maturity of their fellow believers not with the measuring stick of the Gospel, but rather by determining which leaders they most closely associate themselves with and had no problem causing schisms in the body over such an issue (chapters 1-4). **2.** Instead of measuring the success and credentials of the leaders they followed with the measuring stick of the Gospel, they determined the success and credentials of their spiritual leaders in terms of their eloquence and flare (chapter 1-4). **3.** Because the Gospel was not the ruling norm of the church, when dealing with the sin of a prominent, well-to-do member threatened the reputation of the church, the church had no problem acting as if he had nothing to repent of (chapter 5). **4.** Because the Gospel was not the ruling norm, the rich in the church got away with suing the poor (chapter 6). **5.** Because the Gospel was not the measuring stick for holiness, a theologically mature believer felt free to exercise his own rights to eat meat sacrificed to idols even though it meant the real demise of his brother's soul (chapters 8-10). **6.** Because the Gospel was not the ruling standard, the rich in the church had no problem letting the poor go hungry as they got fat at their own Lord's Supper feasts (chapter 11). **7.** The Corinthians measured their own godliness, holiness, and spiritual growth with the measuring stick of the ecstatic use of the spiritual gifts (such as tongues speaking and prophecy) and not with the measuring stick of the Gospel, which would call them to measure spiritual growth in terms of faith, hope, and love (chapters 12-14). **8.** Their own confusion in regard to the resurrection, which Paul identifies as an essential component to the Gospel, is most likely the greatest evidence that they were in need of this instruction (1 Corinthians 15).¹⁰ In every way the Gospel had been removed from the center of the church in Corinth. Paul saw that this was the root of all their issues, and thus his aim in 1 Corinthians was to reestablish the biblical Gospel as the norming norm (the standardizing standard) of their lives, the hub and center of all their desires, decisions, and delights.

Conclusion

Hopefully you see the big picture of 1 Corinthians with a bit more clarity as a result of this morning's sermon. As you may have already been able to see, we have much to learn from 1 Corinthians. We live in a culture much like theirs, and thus experience many of the same temptations both within the church and without. The overarching, big picture message of 1 Corinthians is much needed in today's Christian culture. It would be a vast oversight to fail to apply the overarching message of 1 Corinthians on the whole. Because the letter is so long, there is a tendency to get so lost in the trees that one can tend to forget that he is traversing through a

¹⁰Garland has set forth a similar list in his commentary. He says, "It is behind the Corinthian's attraction to flashy displays of knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual gifts. It throws light on why someone pursued a lawsuit against a brother Christian (6:1-11), why some sought to justify eating food sacrificed to idols so that they could participate fully in their society (8:1-11:1), why the issue of headdress during worship became a problem (11:2-16), and why some wished to vaunt their spiritual gifts above others (21:1-12:40). Paul pictures the church as divided into 'haves' and 'have-nots' (11:22)." Ibid., 7. Thisselton does the same. See Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 40-41. As would be expected, Thisselton's list is not identical to Garland's.

well mapped out forest. There is so much to apply on the macro level of 1 Corinthians. Next week, Lord willing, I will seek to apply the overarching message of 1 Corinthians.