

Wisdom for life in a messy world

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[0:00] Well, do take a seat. We are in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 to begin with all the way to verse 1 of chapter 11, page 1151. Let's crack on. We had a week off last week from 1 Corinthians. It was harvest. But today we're back in Paul's letter to this very messy church living in a very messy world.

Christians in Corinth lived in the midst of pagan idolatry, rampant sexual immorality, worldly attitudes of pride, jealousy, boasting, and sadly a whole lot of those things that ended up in the church as well.

So much of being salt and light, it would work the other way around. They were divided over their leaders. They were boasting over their spiritual maturity, even though they didn't have very much. Incest was part of the culture, and they were okay with that. There were lawsuits between believers. They were eating and worshipping in pagan temples. And as we'll see this week and over the next couple of weeks, they had all sorts of arrogance and confusion over spiritual gifts.

They were dressing in inappropriate ways. They were behaving in inappropriate ways when it came to the Lord's Supper. There are more problems that come afloat towards the end of the letter, and even more in Paul's second letter as well.

[1:20] No wonder Paul calls them infants, babes in Christ, immature believers. Some of the people, though, didn't seem to be bothered. Their reaction was one of indifference. Does it matter? We're free in Christ after all.

Now, that may have been one of Paul's slogans as he took the Gospel to Corinth to start with, as he preached about free salvation, freedom from the Old Testament law's demands.

But as often happens, people take words out of context, don't they, and they go too far. See, some of the Corinthians thought, well, that sounds great, Paul. That means that the past is forgiven, the future is certain, which means whatever we do now doesn't make any difference.

We can live as we like. There's going to be a new heaven, a new earth, a new body. I can do what I like now, because I'm in Jesus. That was licensed. Paul said, no, no, no, no, that's not right.

That's not right. But other people wanted to go in another direction. They wanted Paul to lay down the law and say, okay, give us a list. Tell us what things we can and can't do. That was clear in chapter 7 around marriage.

[2:30] It's clear in their requests here. They wanted rules, statutes to govern every part of their lives. And that was legalism. Of course, the Bible does set some very clear laws for us, doesn't it?

And some limits for us. That's why we need to study the Scriptures. So we can know the things that the Bible commands, so we can do them. And we can identify the things the Bible says we shouldn't do, so we can stay away from them.

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, we had a young boy walking along a plank with those two dangers on either sides of license and legalism. If you've walked in the Lake District and walked along Striding Edge, you'll know that precipitous fall on either sides.

Paul says there are these two dangers. That's why he calls the Christians in verse 15 of chapter 10 to think.

He says this, I speak to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say. I hope I can say the same this morning. Sensible people, by and large.

[3:34] We're able to think and apply the Bible's teaching to our own lives. That's right, isn't it? Maybe we might need some help sometimes. But we should be able to do that so that we can enjoy all the true freedom that Christ brings by his death on the cross.

We are not under law. We don't have to follow all those minutiae of Old Testament commandments and some commandments that other churches put together. But that doesn't mean that in Christ we're now free to live exactly as we like.

We're free from the law of sin and death. But we are now in Christ. And that demands a new way of living. So bookending our passage are two reasons that Paul wants them to have in their minds so that they would seek to live within the bounds that God gives them.

I hope this is going to be a very practical sermon. It could be there's lots of minutiae, lots of rabbit holes we could go down in this passage. I want to avoid that. You can ask me about those later if you like. But two bookends.

One is, Paul says, look ahead to your eternal hope. That's where the passage began, chapter 9, verses 24 to 27. Paul describes the Christian life here like a race or an athletic event.

[4:45] One that you need to train for. I was never any good at hurdles. Or high jump or long jump. Pretty much any athletic things. But many of those events need your body to learn a new way to move and act.

So that when you release that javelin or you come to that hurdle, you get over it. So when the race comes, you can do it perfectly or the event comes, you can do it.

Practice patterns, routines are vital so that we get it right. Paul says the Christian life is like that. There is a pattern to follow. Train yourself so you don't get disqualified.

Now remember that works don't win us forgiveness. But they should show that we have been forgiven. Our works don't bring us into God's family.

We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But our works should show that we belong to God's family. They're evidence. And if we belong to Christ, Jesus says that we will want to obey him.

[5:47] If you love me, he said you will keep my commandments. Loving him for what he's done. But also loving him because we know that ultimately a life of obedience to God's commands brings blessing.

His way is the best way. But that isn't the way that we're wired. We may have new life in Christ, but that old person is still alive in us. That human nature that was corrupted by sin is still there.

And so we need to train ourselves to bring those sinful desires in check. So that we live a life as a child of God. Paul says, think about that finish line.

Think about where you're going. Think about that training and keep going. Keep going. That's his first thing. And then he says, chapter 11, verse 1. Look to the example of Jesus.

We'll come back to this later on as well. Actually, Paul says here that we should follow his example. Or the Corinthians should follow his example. But whose example is Paul following? He's following the example of Jesus.

[6:54] Philippians 2, he explains some of what that looks like. He says, in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing. By taking the very nature of a servant. Being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death.

Even death on the cross. What's Jesus' example that Paul is emulating, that we should emulate? It's one of a humble, servant-hearted, self-sacrificing Lord.

That looks for the good of others, even when it's costly. So Paul says, keep your eye on the prize so you run the race well. And keep your eyes on Jesus and follow his example.

You do that. You'll walk the walk, you'll talk the talk, and you'll be able to live out a Christian life in this messy, complicated world. But Paul isn't finished, in case you thought that was the end of the talk today.

[8:01] In chapter 10, he walks the Corinthians through the same or similar issues that he addressed back in chapter 8, concerning food sacrificed to idols.

And once again, what he wants to do is not give them law, but give them principles that they can apply. Not just in that case, but in any case.

We're going to see some weird stuff over the next couple of weeks. Controversies about women having their heads uncovered. Men with long hair. Some of you would love to have.

Some of you would love to have hair. Why was that a controversy in the church? We're going to find out. How does Paul deal with it? Well, he uses some of the principles that are going to be laid down today.

I used the image earlier on of striding edge to illustrate those dangers of license and liberalism. In doing what we like on one side and seeking to be controlled tightly on the other.

[9:00] But license leads to sin. Law leads to pride. Both of us actually rob us of the freedom that is ours in Christ.

So Paul gives them these principles. And maybe that's where this idea of a thin path kind of goes against the grain. Because I think the Christian life is a glorious freedom.

Jesus said that he had come to make us free. To give us life in all its fullness. So here's another example. Maybe you can never imagine doing this. But imagine this.

You and your extended family. Aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters. And all their children. Club together. And you buy a big house. Some of you thinking, I can't imagine anything worse.

Living with my family like that. Just come with me for a moment, okay. It is an enormous house. And it's got fantastic grounds. A grand garden stretching out into the distance. There are woods.

[9:56] There is a stream. There are hills. There are secret dells. It is a perfect place for children and grandchildren to grow up and enjoy the freedom of that. But at the far end of the garden, there is a steep drop straight down onto a busy dual carriageway.

What do you want to do when you move into that house? Well, you want your children and the young people to be able to enjoy the freedom of that amazing garden. But you don't want them to go over the edge. So what are you going to do?

You're going to put a fence up there, aren't you? To block it off. To shield them in. So there is a certain amount of freedom there. A huge amount of freedom. But the dangers are shielded. But then they grow up.

Kids have that annoying habit, don't they? They do. They grow up. They get taller than you. And they grow up and they want to leave those safe confines where you're controlling everything and go and do their own thing.

And the town next door, well, it's great, but there are new dangers there. There are some joys.

There are schools and clubs and sports and friends. There are good places to go, but there are lots of dangers.

[11:01] There are busy roads. Certain places where crime is rife. Certain shops, certain activities that you know would be harmful for them. What do you do? Do you keep your children penned in forever?

Of course you can't. You can't do that. So as a parent, what would you do? Well, you'd walk them out. You'd show them where the dangers lie. You'd teach them principles that would say, if this kind of thing happens, then maybe this is what you should do.

So they can recognize danger. So they can tell good from evil. So they know how, what to do that is right when you are not with them. Got to think for themselves.

That's Paul telling the Corinthians, here, think about these things. So that's what Paul is telling these Corinthian Christians, encouraging them to see the boundaries to Christian freedom, trying to instill in them principles that will help them and hopefully help us navigate life in this messed up, broken, sinful world.

Now, I wrote down six. As I was reading the sermon earlier on, I came up with another one. I won't give that. But there are, I think, six here. They're all reasonably brief. But they will raise lots of practical questions.

[12:11] So if you've got any questions, write them down. You might want to write down these headings as well. I don't normally encourage that, but I think this could be useful for you. So you've got almost like a quiver of arrows, a range of different things to help you think through about what is the godly way to live in certain circumstances.

Here is the first one. Don't think you are immune from falling. Be watchful. That's verses 1 to 13 of chapter 10. If you've been a Christian for a while, maybe a long time, it's very easy to feel secure.

After all, you've had an encounter with Jesus that brought you to faith. You've been baptised.

You've been confirmed. You're involved in a church. You're there most weeks. You read the Bible.

You give. You serve, to some extent, anyway. And you feel like everything in your faith is solid.

Other people might fall away, but it won't ever be you. You've got the Christian life sorted.

But if that's how you feel, Paul says this, don't be too sure. Don't be too sure. If you think you're standing firm, be careful you don't fall. I talked earlier on about that sinful nature that we have in us.

[13:24] Even if we avoid everything in the world, there is still a problem of us. And if we're not seeking to grow in holiness, then unconsciously we will be growing in ungodliness.

If we're not moving closer to Jesus, we will be drifting away from him. Where you might say, it's not going to happen to me, Dave. Honestly, I've been baptised and confirmed by a bishop.

But what does Paul give us the example of God's Old Testament people? They were baptised by God in the Red Sea. Can't beat that, can we? And what did they do?

They doubted God's love and bowed down and worshipped the golden calf. Ah, yes, but my church leader is a great pastor. Really? God's Old Testament people have Aaron and Moses.

And what did they do? They got led astray into sexual immorality by the nations around them. Ah, yeah, but my church is wonderful. There's so much community here.

[14:22] We've got coffee mornings and home groups and church lunches. We have communion every other week. I'll come every time it's there. They will keep me on the right path. Really? You think food will do it?

God's people were literally fed miraculously by divine food from heaven. And what did they do?

They moaned and they grumbled and they wanted to go back to Egypt.

If you think you're standing firm, be careful. You don't fall. If they could fall and stumble, and they did. If they could fall into sin and wickedness, so can you and so can I.

As we live our Christian lives, we've got to be aware of our propensity to sin and be watchful and active. Don't neglect to read the scriptures. Don't miss church.

I know a number of you will only come when it's communion. Please get out of that habit. Come every week. Don't forget to pray.

[15:24] Don't be unaware of the enemy that is seeking to pull us away from Christ. Don't think you are immune from falling. Be watchful. Secondly, Paul says, don't cheat on Jesus.

Be faithful, verses 14 to 22. Now, we don't live in a town like Corinth. Newton Abbot is not the most multicultural of places. There is no active mosque or Hindu temple, I don't think.

There is no meat making its way from ritual sacrifices to pagan gods into Tesco or Aldi. You don't have to worry about those kind of things. Pagan worship is not a major part of the town life in Newton Abbot.

And yet we are foolish if we think that it's not possible for us also to commit spiritual adultery and to cheat on Jesus. Because not all idols are made of wood and gold.

An idol is anything that pushes us away from God and takes him off the throne of first place in our lives. Sport and hobbies can stop us from following Christ.

[16:29] Family can take priority over obedience to Jesus. Our work environment, if it's one where there's an encouragement of greed and a love of money over truth and godliness, will pull us away from how we should live.

In our last church, we had someone who's a really committed Christian. But any time a group of friends came and they didn't go to church, she would miss church that weekend. Rather than saying, I'm going, why don't you come with me?

No, no, her friends took priority. Now, hobbies, friends, family, work, they are good things. But they can so easily become God's things.

Little idols for which we compromise our commitment to Christ and water down our obedience to him. I wasn't here at the beginning, but I suspect you have the summary of the law.

How does Jesus describe it? We're to love him with part of our hearts and part of our soul. Now, that's not right, is it? Or our heart, soul, mind and strength.

[17:32] But there are other ways of idols too. We can take the Bible and we can twist it so it fits with our own desires. We can shrink God down from the pages of the scripture to something that suits us.

We can make stuff up. We can fall into that trap of thinking that all religions lead to God. We do that. We've made a God of our own design. It's not the God who's revealed himself in scripture.

It's someone else. We downplay the nature of sin. We've made a God of our own design. If we focus sometimes too much on the little minor things in the Bible, and so get things out of kilter with the main things, then again we've got things wrong.

Our minds are twisted. The God we follow is not the God who has revealed himself. But there are some specific dangers in our own town that we need to be aware of.

Spiritualist churches abound in the southwest. I've come across a number of people who would claim to be Christians who are quite happy to go along to those services. Please, brothers and sisters, don't do it.

[18 : 38] They may feel like a Christian church service, but they are evil and demonic. Stay well away. If you play with horoscopes, stop.

It's not just a bit of fun. If you mess around with Eastern philosophers, if you've got a statue of Buddha in the bottom of the garden, take it to the dump. Get rid of it.

What does Paul say to do with these kind of things? He says to flee from them. I've not had to flee very often in my life. Only once, if I can remember. I was cutting the grass in a house we were renting.

And I took the lawnmower over a wasp nest that was in the ground. They weren't happy. Pretty soon that one wasp had multiplied tenfold.

And that tenfold had multiplied a hundredfold. And they were all chasing me. I tell you, I ran up that. God. That's what Paul says. If you're in danger of compromising your faith, of cheating on Jesus with something like this, flee from it.

[19 : 45] If you want to follow Jesus, then follow him. But don't cheat. Be faithful. The last four will be slightly shorter. Number three. Don't imagine everything is good.

Be wary. There is that slogan in verse 23. I have the right to do everything, they say. I have the right to do anything at all. Paul says, yeah, okay.

But not everything is good. Not everything is beneficial. Now, you are sensible people. You know that. You know that sticky buns. You know those nice thick ones with fresh cream in the middle and icing over the top.

That is not a good basis for a diet. And actually, it's probably not going to do you any good whatsoever. But I wonder sometimes, if we think about things that we do in our lives, we know that they are wrong.

We know that there is a danger they might be harmful to us. And we treat them the same way as we do a sticky bun. Well, there is only one sticky bun. I will eat that. Well, maybe you can get away with it with sticky buns.

[20 : 45] But we can't get away with it with things that will damage our walk with Christ. When we mess around with spiritual things, they are far more dangerous.

We've got to think how they affect us. So are there things that we do in our lives that we tolerate, that whilst the Bible doesn't explicitly forbid, we know actually are not going to do us any good? Be honest about that. Think about it. Use your consciences. Paul gives some wonderful advice in Philippians 4 verse 8. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about those kind of things.

If your mind is full of stuff that is the opposite of that, stop doing it. It's not doing you any good. It may not be explicitly condemned in Scripture, but it won't be helpful.

Not everything is good. Be wary. The opposite of that, though, is number four. Don't go looking for trouble. Be thankful. Verses 25 and 26.

[21 : 53] See, the opposite of the person who sees danger nowhere is the one who sees danger everywhere. The person, in the context of the passage, is you won't eat any meat at all or visit any kind of places just in case they might possibly, somewhere down the line, have something to do with pagan worship.

Paul says, be sensible. Eat what's in front of you with thankful hearts. Have friends that aren't Christians and go to their houses. Celebrate weddings and birthdays.

Look for the good, the joy, the blessings, and enjoy the good things that are there as a gift from God. Don't think that everything is dangerous. Now, that needs balancing with point three.

It needs bordering with the clear commands and prohibitions in the Bible. But again, we need to use our minds and think through them. And life is complicated, isn't it?

Life is complicated. Someone's having a birthday party downstairs in the bottom of a Hindu temple. Should you go? A niece is in a gay relationship.

[23 : 04] She's invited you to the wedding to play a key part in the ceremony. Should you go along? You've been invited to a stag night where you know almost all the other guys there are going to get rolling drunk.

Is that the kind of place you should be? I don't know. I think you can look at it from all sorts of different directions. Paul says, wrestle with it. Use your minds. Not everything that might seem dangerous will be. Not everything that looks good will be. Balance it up between those two things. Don't imagine everything is good. Be wary. Don't go looking for trouble. Be thankful. Here's number four. Don't just think about yourself. Be a servant of all. Now this doesn't mean we're to do what makes everyone else happy. Because if we do that we're going to end up compromising our faith again and again and again. It does mean though that we need to put the needs of other people before ourselves. [24:01] And their real needs. And what is their greatest need? Well their greatest need is to know Jesus as their Lord and their Saviour. That's why Paul says in verses 32 and 33 do not cause anyone to stumble whether Jews or Greeks or the Church of God.

Don't live in such a way that those who are not Christians might be put off and those who are Christians will be weakened in their faith. So Paul, when he was with the Jews in Jerusalem he lived like a Jew. He went to the temple. He made the sacrifices. He did all those things. But when he was in the Gentile areas well he lived like a Greek. He ate like a Greek. Maybe he dressed like a Greek. I'm not sure what a Greek person in those days dressed like if there was any difference. But he did whatever he did with those contexts so that they would not turn their hearts away from Jesus. Within those other boundaries as well. That's the context behind Paul's clear injunction in verses 27 to 30.

[25:05] So here's the scene. In your Christian freedom you've been invited to the house of a pagan friend for a meal. You assume the feast, the meat that they're serving and it's really good by the way will have been served at a pagan temple because all the meat in that town comes from there.

But you've exercised your Christian rights to sit and eat because you know their idols are nothing and actually that meat smells good. So you're sat in down and you're tucking in when your friend speaks up.

I'm so glad, she says. I'm so glad you've come. I'm so glad you're not one of those holier-than-thou Christians. You know the sort who thinks our gods are nothing, who wouldn't go anywhere near a sacrificial meal.

And I'm so glad you are worshipping with us right now. Well, all of a sudden it's not a meal anymore, is it? All of a sudden for those friends that have invited you in, this is something much more significant.

What does Paul say? He says you need to stop eating. Right then. Because if you carry on, you're saying that their ideas are right. That their gods are okay.

[26:16] That it is fine to worship God and these idols. that Christ doesn't matter. So when Paul says don't just think about yourself, be a servant of all, he is saying, he isn't saying do what makes you popular.

After all, leaving a meal halfway through is not going to win you any friends. Paul has in mind a way of living that serves people in the best way possible. That presents Christ to them as a precious, glorious saviour.

And that's the last point. Number six. In all these things, don't forget the gospel. Be a witness. Paul says, verse 33, I do all these things so that they may be saved.

Our life as a Christian isn't just about us. It's about those who will look at us. Those who don't yet know Jesus and who right now are facing a lost eternity. And if they're going to be attracted to Jesus, they need to see us live in joy-filled, happy, holy lives that stand out from the world, that shine like stars, as Paul says elsewhere, so that they might see Christ in us and might come up with that question that Peter talks about.

Could you give me a reason for your faith? Why do you do this? It's a bit weird. But it seems to be working for you. Tell me about the God you follow.

[27:48] People will only do that if they can see the joy and peace and contentment that comes from a life of following Christ. Sometimes that will mean doing things that we'd rather not do.

Sometimes it will mean doing things that the world would rather we didn't do. But the aim of our lives is to live in such a way that people are drawn to Jesus. For that's the way God is most

glorified.

That's that last principle. to help us navigate these hard decisions of life. Don't forget the gospel. Be a witness. Friends, the obedient life is the blessed life and it's the good life but it isn't always easy. And if we're honest it isn't always straightforward. To work our way through the moral mazes we need to face we do need to study the scriptures. We need to know the things the Bible commands and do them.

We need to see the things the Bible prohibits and stay away from them. And in all those other areas we're to use our God-given minds and the fellowship of our Christian family to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

[28:56] Keeping our eyes on that prize and seeking to live like Jesus. Don't think you're immune from falling. Be watchful. Don't cheat on Jesus.

Be faithful. Don't imagine everything is good. Be wary. Don't go looking for trouble. Be thankful. Don't just think about yourself. Be a servant of all. Don't forget the gospel.

Be a witness. And I'm going to add my seventh one. Don't imagine you've got it all sorted. Be humble. We're a Christian family together.

As in any family we're going to come up with some different ideas on these. Don't think you've got it all cracked. And that your way is the best way. We've got to be humble with each other.

Recognise that for one person their conscience is going to tell them something and for another person it may say something different. We've got to live with one another gently, humbly like that.

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