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Session 16 - 1 Corinthians

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Okay, so let's talk about the book of 1 Corinthians. We're going to treat it like a kind of crime scene. Evidence of a massive cultural collision that happened 2,000 years ago in the Roman city of Corinth.

See, to really get this letter, we can't just read it. We have to see it for what it is. One side of a very hidden and very intense conversation.

And that brings us to the central mystery we have to solve. What if what we're reading is an answer to questions we can't hear? A response to a situation we can't fully see? Because that's exactly what it is. We're basically listening in on one side of a really complicated phone call.

And just to make it a little trickier, we know from the text itself that the Apostle Paul wrote at least four different letters to the church in Corinth. Yeah, that's right. And this is a crucial piece of the puzzle.

What we call 1 Corinthians is actually the second letter he sent. And 2 Corinthians, that's really the fourth. So when we open this book, we are literally jumping into the middle of a long, messy, and sometimes pretty tense ongoing conversation.

So how do we even begin to piece together Paul's side of the dialogue? Well, first, we have to understand the world he was talking to. We've got to crack the cultural code of 1st century Corinth. And there are two ideas that are absolutely essential to get.

First up is the patron-client relationship. You have to understand, this was the social operating system of the entire Roman world. A wealthy, high-status person, the patron, would help out a lower-status person, the client.

But in return, that client owed them public loyalty and support. Everything was about status, obligation, and who you knew. And second, Corinth was crawling with sophists.

Just think of them as the celebrity influencers of the ancient world. Seriously, they were these charismatic teachers who competed for followers, trying to wow the crowds with their amazing speeches and big promises of wisdom. Leadership was a performance, a total competition for status and popularity.

So here's the bottom line. These powerful cultural forces didn't just stop at the church door. No way.

They came right inside and started to infect the community. The church in Corinth was getting obsessed with the exact same things as the city around it. Social status, who sounded the smartest, who had the richest friends.

And this, well, this created some major, major problems. Alright, let's open up our first case file and see exactly how this all played out. We're going to look at how this obsession with status led to these weird leadership cults and a truly mind-blowing social scandal.

So Paul kicks off his letter by hitting this issue head-on. The church had basically split into fan clubs. People were declaring allegiance to different Christian leaders.

Paul, this other guy, Apollos, Cephas- like they were rival sophists or competing patrons. They were treating their spiritual leaders like celebrities, hoping to get some second-hand status by picking the best one. Now Paul's response here is just brilliant.

He doesn't just tell them to stop. He pulls the rug out from under their entire value system. He contrasts the wisdom of Corinth, which is all about power, status, and fancy speeches, with what he calls the foolishness of the gospel.

This new wisdom is centered on a crucified, humiliated messiah. It completely flips their world upside down, saying true strength is in weakness, and real status is found in serving others. And this clash of values leads us to one of the most bizarre situations in the entire New Testament.

There was a guy in the church having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Now even the pagan culture around them thought this was wrong. But the really shocking part wasn't just the act.

It was the church's reaction. They were proud of it. They were boasting.

Why on earth would they do that? While all the clues point right back to that cultural code we talked about, this man was almost certainly a wealthy, high-status patron. The church wasn't just putting up with his behavior. They were boasting that someone that important was in their group.

They cared more about his money and his influence than they did about their own moral integrity. And again, Paul just refuses to argue on their terms. He reframes the entire problem using imagery from the Old Testament.

He tells them, you guys are the temple of God, and a temple has to be holy. So this impurity, this sin, had to be removed to protect the whole community. And it didn't matter one bit how rich or powerful the guy was.

His social status meant nothing. Okay, let's move to our second case file. This one reveals a totally different kind of hidden clue.

It's not about social status. It's about something we use every day without a second thought. Punctuation.

So, in chapter 7, Paul writes this line, It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Now, if you read it just like that, it sounds like Paul is saying everyone should be celibate. And for centuries, that's how a lot of people took it.

But what if we've been putting the punctuation in the wrong place? Look at this. The meaning completely changes if Paul isn't making a command, but is actually quoting a slogan from the Corinthians letter to him. Is he making a statement? Or is he quoting their slogan back to them so he can correct it? And here's the aha moment.

The original Greek manuscripts had no punctuation. No commas. No periods.

Definitely no quotation marks. Not even spaces between the words. Every piece of punctuation in our modern Bibles was added by translators centuries later.

They're interpreters. And where they decide to put a quotation mark can totally change what a verse means. It's very likely Paul was quoting the Corinthians here to set them straight.

Let's move to our final case. And honestly, this might be the most powerful, most vivid picture of how Corinthian culture was corrupting the church. It all goes down during their most important shared ritual, the Lord's Supper, or Communion.

Paul uses this absolutely stunning phrase to describe the scene. At a meal that's supposed to be about unity, some people are starving while others are literally getting drunk. I mean, how is that even possible? To get it, you have to remember that in the early church, communion was part of a whole community meal, and it was probably held in the home of a rich church member.

So what was really going on? What was happening was blatant social segregation. The wealthy patrons who had free time, they'd show up early. They'd gather in the main dining room and get served this amazing full meal with tons of wine.

But the poor members, the laborers and slaves, they'd have to show up late after they finished work, and they were pushed out into the courtyard, the atrium, and served whatever was left over. So this meal, instead of being about unity, became a public display of social status that shamed and humiliated the poor. So across all these different issues- the leadership cults, the scandal, the divided communion meal- Paul's response is incredibly consistent.

He sees the root problem every time. The church had adopted the values of its city. And because of that, his solution isn't just a list of new rules to follow.

It's way bigger than that. It's a complete replacement of their cultural operating system. He gives them this radical gospel wisdom where everything is flipped upside down.

The last or first, the weak or strong, and real honor is found in serving others and remembering the unity they have in a suffering savior. You know, this whole journey into 1 Corinthians leaves us with a pretty important question. Seeing just how deeply this letter is tangled up in its own specific time and place, it really forces us to ask: how often do we read ancient words, or any words, really, without stopping to understand the world that created them?