



"Sin City
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"
Acts 18:1-17
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Introduction.

Cities have a reputation, just like people. There are things for which a city is known that make it distinctive. Austin has a reputation of being the living music capital of the world, and our state capitol building is taller than the one in Washington, DC (everything is bigger in Texas!). Austin is home to the University of Texas, and there is also the "Keep Austin Weird" element which adds a certain color to our town.

Los Angeles has developed quite a reputation as a city over the years. Hollywood, Sunset Boulevard, Rodeo Drive, the ocean, the mountains, the weather – they all have made Los Angeles a very attractive place to live, and people have flocked there by the thousands in the past.

However, I read where Stephen Spielberg, whose new film "Super 8" just hit the theaters, decided to move his family from Los Angeles to New York City. Now why in the world would he move his family all the way to New York City? The Hollywood director said, "With all the riots, the fires, the mudslides, and the earthquakes, I decided that New York City sounded like a safer place for my family to live."

Cities develop reputations that impact the way people view them. It is true today, and it was true in the ancient world as well. Corinth was a city in ancient Greece that developed quite a reputation, and like LA its reputation wasn't all that flattering. It was known all over the world for its immorality, and one could say it was the Las Vegas, New Orleans, and Amsterdam all rolled into one in the ancient world! The apostle Paul sensed a call from God to go to Corinth, and he traveled there to share the message of the gospel.

I. The City of Corinth.

The city of Corinth, which was 50 miles west of Athens, holds an important place in the Bible. There are two letters from the apostle Paul in the NT written to the church in Corinth, and scholars believe there were actually three if not four letters written to the Corinthians. The other letters, however, are lost to us now. Also, from this passage we learn that Paul stayed in Corinth for a period of 18 months, and he carried on an extensive ministry of evangelism and discipleship. It was the longest time he spent in one community up to this point in his missionary travels.

What do we know about the city of Corinth? **First**, we know that it was a great **center of commerce**. Corinth sat on a plateau overlooking the isthmus connecting central Greece to the north with the Peloponnesus to the south. It was built on the north side of the Acrocorinth, an acropolis that rose 1,886 feet and provided an almost impregnable fortress for the city. To the east was the port of Cencrea on the Saronic Gulf which led out to the Aegean Sea, and to the

west was the port of Lechaemum on the Gulf of Corinth which led to the Adriatic Sea. As a result the city was called the marketplace of Greece because of its access to the two oceans and the small isthmus that connected them. At its zenith, Corinth had a population of 750,000 people, and it was one of the leading cities of the Roman Empire.

Second, as I've said, Corinth had a reputation for being a place of great immorality. On the top of the Acrocorinth stood the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. A thousand female prostitutes served the temple, and in the evening they would come down to the streets of the city and ply their trade. It became a proverb, "No one can afford a trip to Corinth," and the promiscuity of the city was so well known that the word *korinthiazomai* came to mean "to be sexually immorality." In Greece if a Corinthian was ever portrayed on the stage, he was always depicted as a drunk.

Finally, it was a **proud city**. The arrogance of the Corinthians clearly emerges in Paul's correspondence with them. The people were proud of their city, which Julius Caesar rebuilt in 46 BC. They boasted of their wealth and culture, and the world-famous Pan-Hellenic Isthmian Games that were held every two years and were second only to the Olympic Games in Greece. And they prided themselves in their political prestige as the capital of the province of Achaia. This was the city to which the apostle Paul felt called to bring the Good News of God's love through Jesus Christ.

II. A Wonderful Partnership.

Our passage says, *"There [Paul] met a Jew 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 went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (18:2-4).*

This married couple, whom Paul later referred to as his "fellow-workers in Christ Jesus," left Rome for Corinth because of an imperial edict. All Jews were expelled from Rome because of disturbances in the community, and we learn from Roman historians this took place in 49 and 50 AD. Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, and, because they were all tentmakers, the three went into business together.

Jewish law required that rabbis learn a trade to ensure they would never become detached scholars but instead always know what life was like as a working person. Before his conversion, Paul had been a rabbi and he learned the trade of tent making. There was a particular cloth made in his hometown of Tarsus that was used for making tents and other hangings. The apostle continued his practice of making tents in order support himself during his missionary travels. He did this voluntarily to prevent people from accusing him that he was preaching Christ for the money. Also, he didn't want to be a burden to the new churches he was starting, and he wanted to offer the gospel free of charge. However, we learn from this passage that when Silas and Timothy arrived, they brought with them a financial gift from the church in Philippi to support Paul, and then he devoted himself full-time to ministry.

Here we see a great example of partnership in the gospel. First, there is the partnership of Aquila and Priscilla. Paul joined with this couple not only in the working with their hands but

also in the working of their hearts as they followed Christ together. But there is also the partnership of the church in Philippi who supported him financially.

In his first letter to the Corinthians (2:3), Paul said that he came to Corinth in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. He had been given a vision to go to Macedonia, but the mission had not gone at all like he expected. When he was in Athens, he felt like he had been dismissed with polite contempt. In other cities like Thessalonica and Berea he had been run out of town. In Corinth he was separated from Silas and Timothy, and he must have been lonely. What a blessing and an encouragement Aquila and Priscilla must have been to him, and what an encouragement the gift from the church in Philippi must have been too.

The 4th of July is just around the corner, and many of us will grill outdoors. If we cook with good old Kingsford charcoal, we'll start out by assembling the charcoal briquettes in a pile. Then we'll soak the briquettes with lighter fluid and set them on fire, and after 20-30 minutes, we'll have a nice hot fire ready for grilling. There is a fascinating principle at work whenever you cook over charcoal. As long as the briquettes are next to each other, they work together to produce a fire strong enough to cook meat, chicken or fish. However, if you take one of those briquettes away from the others and put it off to the side by itself, within minutes it will grow stone cold. It is only as the briquettes stay close to each other they burn strong and long. Check it out the next time you grill outdoors.

The same principle is true for us as followers of Christ. Saint John of the Cross once said, "The virtuous soul that is alone...is like the burning coal [left] alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter."ⁱⁱ It is only as we are connected to other believers that our passion for the Lord will continue to burn. If we try to go it alone, if we don't cultivate our community with other followers of Christ, our fire for the Lord can grow stone cold.

III. The Lord's Providence.

While working with Aquila and Priscilla, Paul went to the local synagogue every Sabbath, and Luke tells us that he talked with the people there, trying to persuade them concerning the gospel. But his ministry met with resistance, which led him to repeat the dramatic gesture he made previously when he was in Pisidian Antioch. He shook the dust off his clothes and declared that now their blood was now on their own heads, echoing the words of Ezekiel. Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearing Gentile. It was like Chick-fil-A opening right next door to a MacDonald's! People could follow the same route they were accustomed to going before and simply stop next door.

In the face of opposition, Paul was given another vision. These seem to have come to him on rare occasions and at critical periods in his life as an encouragement about his ministry. In this particular vision Paul saw the risen Christ assuring him that no harm would overtake him in Corinth despite all the opposition, and the Lord encouraged him to not be fearful but to continue to speak boldly. Then the Lord added, "*For I have many people in this city*" (18:10).

The result of this vision was that Paul stayed on in Corinth for 18 months, probably from the fall of 50 AD to the spring of 52 AD. God promised that no harm would come to him, and that promise was fulfilled when the Jews brought charges against the apostle and took him to court before Gallio, the proconsul. Without speaking a word, he was vindicated, and his critics received harsh treatment. This reminds us the Lord is in control. Evil will never have the last

word, and God is with us in the midst of whatever trial we have to face. Look to Jesus to be with you and deliver you from whatever hardship you may be in today.

Conclusion/Application.

As we close this morning, there is one more thing related to this passage that I want you to notice. It has to do with **God's forgiveness**. The apostle Paul shared the love of Christ with a group of people who lived in a town that could have been called Sin City. Many of them came to faith out of some pretty rough backgrounds, and they had wandered far from God before they began to follow Jesus.

In writing to the Corinthians in chapter 6 of his first epistle, after listing a number of lifestyles that were less than God's best, Paul writes: "*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*" (1 Cor. 6:11). It's a passage worth reading, especially in light of the current discussions regarding our church and the denomination. We would all do well to wrestle with the text and come to an understanding of what we think it means.

But no matter where you come down on these issues, the main point of Paul's message is there is forgiveness in Christ, regardless of what we've done. There is no sin too great for God to forgive, and you cannot fall so far that the grace of God can't reach you. If the Lord has been tugging at your heart in recent weeks, why don't you stop running and just say "Yes" to Christ. Ask Him to forgive you and to give you a fresh start. Do it today.

Several years ago, Lorie and I traveled to Corinth as a part of a group from our former church. There in the *agora*, the marketplace of the old city, we celebrated communion together. The elements were placed on the *bema*, the judgment seat of the proconsul before whom justice was decided. It was probably at this stone Paul appeared before Gallio in Corinth.

It was a deeply moving experience to take communion in that place and reflect on the church in Corinth and all they went through as a family of faith. There had been divisions in the church, some saying they were of Paul, others of Apollos, and still others of Peter and Christ. There was a man who was sleeping with his stepmother, and his sin had to be confronted. And the church suffered from arrogance and pride, and they thought they were more spiritual than everyone else. Despite all these problems and struggles, the congregation stayed together.

As you reflect on this photograph of communion that day in the city of Corinth, and as we celebrate the Lord's Supper in just a moment here in this sanctuary, I encourage you to think about our unity in the body of Christ in the midst of all our diversity and disagreements. Our oneness in Christ isn't based on seeing things just the same; it's based on the fact that we are all sinners saved by grace in desperate need of a Savior. Thanks be to God for His loving kindness in Christ! Amen.

ⁱQuoted by Philip Yancey in *Church: Why Bother?* p. 23.