**HEALTHY CHURCHES LEARN TO OBEY**

**(1 Corinthians 8:1-10:13)**

You have heard the saying, “You can’t see the forest for all the trees.” If I plopped you down in the middle of a forest with which you weren’t familiar, you might have some difficulty determining directions. You wouldn’t know the boundaries of the forest. You could certainly become familiar with the trees in the forest, but you wouldn’t be able to have an accurate conception of what the forest looks like from the air. You would lack that perspective.

Quite often, we have that same problem with passages from the Bible. We may become familiar with verses within a large passage, but we lack a real appreciation for the larger context of the text.

In the Bible, a book if made up of chapters. The chapters are made up of paragraphs. The paragraphs are made up of sentences. The sentences are made up of words. The words are made up of letters. Sometimes we get so caught up in words and sentences, that we pay too little attention to the paragraphs and the chapters. We miss the forest for the trees.

The focus in our study of 1 Corinthians has been “Healthy Churches.” What do healthy churches look like? What do healthy churches do?

Tonight, we are going to look at a long text, much longer than we normally do. It is 53 verses long. It covers 2 and ½ chapters. It would be easy for our view to become obscured by all of the trees. We need to get in a helicopter and hover over the trees to get a better sense and perspective of our passage.

There are 12 paragraphs, and I am going to do something I don’t believe I have ever done. We are going to read each paragraph, and I am going to give you a one-sentence summary of each paragraph.

8:1-3 **Loving well is more important than knowing**

**much.**

8:4-6 **Our God is the only God who really exists.**

8:7-13 **Be considerate of those who lack the knowledge**

**you have.**

9:1-2 **The believers in Corinth know full well that**

**Paul has been sent by Jesus.**

9:3-7 **Paul and Barnabas have a right to financial**

**support.**

9:8-12a **The right to financial support is based on the**

**teaching of the Old Testament.**

9:12b-14 **Paul and Barnabas forfeited their right to**

**financial support so as not to block the progress**

**of the gospel**

9:15-18 **Paul has an inward constraint to preach the**

**Gospel, but he has freely chosen to forego**

**financial compensation.**

9:19-23 **Paul seeks to identify with many types of people**

**so as to reach them with the good news of Jesus.**

9:24-27 **Paul exercises control over his body so there will**

**be no contradiction between what he preaches**

**and how he lives.**

10:1-5 **All the Israelites in the Exodus were sustained**

**by Jesus, but they did please God.**

10:6-13 **These Israelites serve as negative examples**

**warning us against a wide array of temptations.**

When we get a wide-angle lens and pull back a little, it appears that the passage is about obedience, doing the right thing. This passage teaches us three way in which you and I can learn to obey God.

1. **WE LEARN TO OBEY GOD BY THE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING.**

You and I don’t fall into obedience. We don’t stumble into right living. It is something that has to be taught. This is what Paul sought to do with those believers in Corinth.

The Corinthians Christians were not full-grown followers of Jesus. Look at how Paul described them in 3:1-4. These followers of Jesus were still on the bottle.

Scripture refers to itself as both milk and meat. Look at what the author of Hebrews wrote in 5:11-14.

One of the milk teachings just might be the importance of showing love towards others. The person who wants to show off his knowledge is not nearly as far advanced as he thinks he is. The better we love, the closer we are to Jesus.

We especially need to remember the primacy of love we find ourselves in sticky situations. Paul used a controversial matter as an example. He addressed the topic of whether or not to eat food that had been offered first to idols.

In the ancient world, meat markets were located next to temples. The ancient world was very religious. Idol worship was commonplace. Part of worshipping idols was offering animal sacrifices to the gods. Some of the meat was given to the priests. Some of it was sold in the nearby market.

When you bought meat in the market that was next to a temple of worship, there was a high likelihood that meet had first been offered to an idol. Christians were faced with the question, “Should I eat such meat?”

Knowledge told you, “It is not big deal. False gods are not real.” Love, however, taught you to ask, “Where is my neighbor on this?” Love said, “Don’t do anything to harm your neighbor.”

Growing is a process. We don’t get there in a day.

I like the story told by John Ortberg:

We were with friends at an open-air street fair when we spotted a mechanical bull that tries to buck people off. They guy operating the bull said, “Watching it isn’t nearly as fun as riding.” So, I told the bull operator that I wanted to ride. He took one look at my middle-aged body and asked, “Are you sure?” That guaranteed that I would not back down.

He explained to me that the bull has 12 levels of difficulty. “It might not be easy,” he said, “but the key is you have to stay centered on the bull. You have to follow the bull. You have to shift your center of gravity as the bull moves.”

So, I got on the bull and it started slow, and then it started moving faster and jostling around, and I was holding on real tight. Then, I remembered his advice, so I loosened up, and it kept moving faster and jolting and bucking and jumping. I was hanging on sideways. My arms were flailing around all over the place. I just hung on and finally the bull slowed down and it stopped, and I was still on the bull. It wasn’t pretty but I made it. I imagined how surprised the operator of the bull would be that I had triumphed. So, I looked over at him and he looked over at me. Shaking his head, he smiled and said, “Nice job. That was level one.”

1. **WE LEARN TO OBEY GOD BY THE MINISTRY OF GOOD EXAMPLES.**

We need fine examples we can watch. We often learn by imitation. Jesus told his disciples to follow Him, and more than once Paul wrote to his readers to follow him as he followed Christ. Look at 4:16; 11:1.

Paul was a good example of devotion. He wasn’t in ministry for the money. He turned down payment so that he would not be open to the charge of doing it for the money.

Paul was an example in evangelism. He got close to people; he got to know them. He expressed interest in them regardless of their background. He relentlessly sought to introduce them to the Lord.

We all need an example, and we need to be an example to someone else.

He died nine years ago at the age of 99. He was arguably the greatest basketball coach the game has known. His name was John Wooden, the Wizard of Westwood. He coached the UCLA Bruins for 25 years. Wooden’s UCLA teams won an unprecedented 10 NCAA championships in 12 years. No one speaks more eloquently about Wooden than Bill Walton, who played for UCLA at a troubled time in America, a time of Vietnam and Watergate, a time when young people were asking hard questions, when dissent was in style.

For Wooden, the answers never changed. “We thought he was nuts,” Walton said. “But in all his preachings and teachings, everything he told us turned out to be true.”

His interest and goal was to make you the best basketball player but first to make you the best person. He would never talk wins and losses but what we needed to succeed in life. Once you were a good human being, you had a chance to be a good player. He never deviated from that.

He never tried to be your friend. He was your teacher, your coach. He handled us with extreme patience.

A few years before his death, Walton would talk with Wooden frequently. At that time, Walton said of Wooden, “He has thousands of maxims. He is more John Wooden today than ever. He is a man who truly has principles and ideas. He didn’t teach basketball. He taught life. He stopped coaching UCLA 25 years ago. Now he just coaches the world.

Here are some John Wooden quotes:

* Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.
* If you don’t have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?
* Make each day your masterpiece.
* Never lie, never cheat, never steal.
* Nothing will work unless you do.
* Success comes from knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.
* Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out.
* Talent is God given. Be humble. Fame is man-given. Be grateful. Conceit is self-given. Be careful.
* The best competition I have is against myself to become better.
* Whatever you do in life, surround yourself with smart people who’ll argue with you.
* Young people need models, not critics.

I would say that we all need models, and we need to work at being good ones ourselves.

1. **WE LEARN TO OBEY GOD BY THE MINISTRY OF BAD EXAMPLES.**

Paul reminded his readers of the history of the Israelites at the time they made the Exodus from Egypt. They were guilty of all kinds sin: idolatry, sexual misconduct, grumbling, lack of faith.

The Bible is full of negative examples. There are many in both the Old and New Testaments. Let’s limit it to the ministry of Jesus. Can you recall one or two negative examples from the teachings of Jesus?

Let’s look at Luke 12:13-21.

There is a legend of a man who had a rather foolish servant. The master often got exasperated with his servant, and one day in a fit of frustration he said to the servant, “You’ve got to be the most foolish man I’ve ever met. Look, I want you to take this staff and carry it with you. And if you ever meet a man more foolish than you are, give him the staff.”

Obediently, the servant carried the staff wherever he went. Often, while out in the marketplace, he’d meet some pretty foolish people. But he was never sure if they were worse off than he. Years passed with the servant still carrying his staff, and then one day, he came back to the castle and was ushered into the bedroom of his master. His Master was quite sick.

In the course of their conversation, the master said, “I’m going on a long journey.”

The servant asked, “When do you plan to be back?”

The master answered, "This is a journey from which I’ll not return.”

The servant said, “Sir, have you made all the necessary preparations?”

The master replied, “No, I've not.”

The servant asked, “Could you have made preparations?”

The master said, “Yes, I guess I’ve had my life to make them, but I’ve been busy about other things.”

The servant said, “Master, you’re going on a journey from which you’ll never return, you could have prepared for it, and you just didn't?”

The master confessed, “Yes, I guess that’s right.”

The servant took the staff he’d carried so long and said, “Master, take this with you. At last I’ve met a man more foolish than myself.”

Don’t be foolish. Learn from the negative examples of others.