

Living Like Mere Men
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
October 18th, 2020

1. The _____ of their divisions: Spiritual
_____ and worldliness (3:1-4)

2. The _____ for their divisions: A _____ -centered
perspective (3:5-9)

3. How should we apply this?
 - a. Are there things in my life that are _____
_____ my spiritual growth?

 - b. Am I contributing to _____ and
_____ in my home or church body?

 - c. Look for ways to _____ in others while
_____ in the Lord to provide the growth.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Romans 8:4-14 contrast the flesh and the Spirit? How does this relate to the natural, spiritual, and fleshly people of 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4?

2. What is the difference between the “milk” and “solid food” that Paul is discussing in v. 2? See Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Peter 2:1-3
 - a. According to Heb. 5:12-14, who is the “solid food” for?

 - b. According to 1 Peter 2:1-3, what is the connection between “putting aside” sinful attitudes and spiritual growth?

3. Why are jealousy and strife listed as evidences of being “fleshly?” (v. 3) How does this fit within the broader theme of divisions that he is addressing in chapters 1-4?

4. It’s been said, “A mature Christian is easily edified (built up).” According to 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, how would you finish this sentence: “An immature Christian is easily...”?

5. How does each of the descriptions of Christian leaders in verses 5-9 combat against the tendency to jealousy, strife, and division among the Corinthians? (i.e. they are “servants” v. 5, they can’t cause the growth v. 6, etc.)

6. Why do Christians tend to elevate certain leaders as “celebrities?” How does that contrast with the perspective of 1 Corinthians 3:5-9? How can we esteem and appreciate people without being guilty of the same thing as the Corinthians?

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Big idea: Worldly thinking and behavior breeds division

Introduction:

Harold Best once said, "A mature Christian is easily edified."

What a rich statement. It doesn't have to be the best sermon in the world, the most insightful comment in conversation, the most profound prayer request, and they seem encouraged, built up, thankful. Wouldn't you like that to be true of you?

Far too often we are not easily edified but rather easily annoyed, easily discouraged, easily impatient, easily irritated, easily pulled into conflict.

As one young man put it, "I sometimes find myself suffering from a sense of over-familiarity with God and the gospel. Reading my Bible doesn't excite me. Listening to sermons becomes routine. Even worship feels common and mundane. At times like these I crave something new and compelling to jolt me out of my spiritual rut. I figure that if I only had a better devotional book, a more powerful preacher, or a worship band with *slightly* more musical gifting, then my heart would become responsive again."

Of course, some books are better than others and we should try to read great books, some preachers are more gifted or sound, some worship music is richer, but most often the problem is not those external things but rather issues of our own heart that are stifling growth.

1 Corinthians 3 puts a finger on why some people seem stuck in spiritual immaturity and the consequences that can have for a church, particularly the unity of a church.

1. The cause of their divisions: Spiritual immaturity and worldliness (3:1-4)
 - a. Spiritual in position, unspiritual in practice
 - i. In 1 Cor. 2:14-16 two categories were "natural" or "spiritual" – the spiritual man was the man with the Holy Spirit who is then able to understand the things of the Spirit of God. The natural man cannot.
 - ii. Romans 8:9 tells us that if we don't have the Spirit we don't belong to Christ because every true Christian has the Spirit of God living within them.
 1. **Romans 8:9** However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.
 2. You could say that is our position or identity – we have the Holy Spirit because we have trusted in Jesus. That was true of the Corinthians as well. He even calls them infants "in Christ." He calls them "brethren."
 - iii. The problem was they were not acting like they have the Spirit. So he can't talk to them like they are "spiritual."
 1. They are acting like "men of flesh," "infants," "fleshly," "mere men."
 2. What does it mean that they are acting like 'men of flesh' or fleshly?"
 - a. "infants in Christ" we can understand. It means they are acting immaturely when they ought to have moved past that stage of immaturity.
 - b. The problem was not lack of access to knowledge.

- i. Paul taught them for 18 months. After that Apollos taught them. Some apparently heard from Peter. They had no excuse for being immature.
 - c. If a 9 month-old knocks something over, pees their pants, and won't stop crying – you wouldn't say, "Grow up! Quit acting like a baby!" They are a baby. However, if a 9 year old or a 19 year old acts the same way, it's a problem. They are acting immaturity and it's either an issue of delayed development or character.
- 3. The problem was a cultivation of worldly attitudes.
- 4. Flesh (Greek – *sarks*) – The immaterial part of a person that has a disposition to sin and opposes God.
 - a. **Romans 7:18** For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.
 - b. **Romans 8:7-9** because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*,⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.
 - c. **Colossians 2:18** Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,
 - d. Note – can also be used literally of body tissue
- 5. This is the inherited mindset of the whole world apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit to give new life.
 - a. Paul is telling the Corinthians, "You're acting as if you're not even saved! You're acting just like the world that doesn't claim to follow Jesus!"
 - b. That's why he says to them, "You're acting like mere men."
- b. It was their jealousy and strife that revealed their fleshly, worldly, immature disposition.
 - i. Jealousy is the attitude and strife is the action that results.
 - 1. Our thoughts effect our emotions and our actions.
 - 2. Jealously comparing yourself to others often leads to tearing them down with words to raise yourself up.
 - 3. It happens with brothers and sisters in a family, it happens with spouses, it happens at work, it can happen within churches. But building on what has been said in 1 Corinthians so far, it shouldn't happen in churches if we recognize that we aren't anything special, the messengers aren't anything special, but God is remarkable.
- c. Does this teach that there is an ongoing category of Christian that we call "carnal Christians?"
 - i. The language comes from the KJV rendering of fleshly as carnal. The thought is that someone can be truly saved and yet live perpetually in a state that never produces fruit, never shows change in their life, but they are saved because they prayed a sinner's prayer when they were young. Is that what this passage is teaching?

- ii. Certainly, that's not the intent of the passage. The intent is to confront those who are acting like unsaved people to show them that their behavior is inconsistent with life in the Spirit. They need to grow up and mature, not remain worldly and immature.
- iii. It does tell us that some people get stuck for a while in immaturity, limited often not back a lack of knowledge or lack of access to knowledge but because of sin that is nurtured and hung onto so that they "are not able to receive it."
 - 1. If you are stagnating spiritually, you feel like your time in the Word is dry or non-existent, you rarely get anything out of church, praying is a chore, it's good to consider whether there are unconfessed, undealt with, patterns of sin in attitudes or actions that are squelching your spiritual life.
 - 2. You may be like these Corinthians that were "in Christ" but acting "unspiritual." You may need to set aside whatever it is that is hindering you so you can long for the pure milk of the word so that you can grow.
 - a. **1 Peter 2:1-3** Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, ² like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,
 - 3. But we also need to heed the warning in 1 John that growing obedience is an indication of a new heart and the total lack of a heart to obey God can indicate that a person is not really saved.
 - 4. **1 John 2:3-6** By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴ The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; ⁵ but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: ⁶ the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.
 - 5. A growing heart for obedience, not perfection, is an indication that we know Him.
- 2. The cure for their divisions: A God-centered perspective (3:5-9)
 - a. He returns to their tribalism around certain leaders that we saw in chapter 1 that launched this whole section.
 - i. Notice he asks an interesting question, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?"
 - ii. It sounds awkward because he doesn't ask "Who" they are but "what" they are.
 - iii. What are they? Servants. Only servants. Why build your identity and faction around a servant? They aren't "masters" to whom you belong? I'm not. John MacArthur's not. John Piper is not. These people are servants.
 - iv. Paul and Apollos were servants "through whom they believed" but not the ones in which they believed.
 - b. Moves to an analogy of a farm that is the first of three analogies.
 - i. There are workers in the field but only God can cause the growth.
 - ii. I can plant a rock in the ground. My friend can water it. But it will still be a rock. Only God can cause the growth.
 - iii. They are servants (v. 5)
 - 1. They are not "anything" (v. 7)
 - a. Every believer is a valuable part of the body. The point is that they were boasting in servants that that are dependent on the Lord just like everyone else.

2. They are “one” (v. 8a)

- a. There is one goal they are working toward: the glory of God through maturing Christians.
- b. Their effort might look different – one plants and another waters – but the goal is the same.
- c. Someone might share the gospel, another disciples through a small group, another teaches SS, another counsels (which is in depth discipleship on a focused topic), but the goal is one and they are united as “fellow workers.”

3. They will be “rewarded” (v. 8b)

- a. Interesting that after downplaying the role of a servant, he does emphasize that they will be rewarded according to their labor.
- b. Not on the basis of success or results, but labor.
- c. Jeremiah labored for 50 years with perhaps only two converts - Baruch, his scribe (32:12; 36:1–4; 45:1–5); and Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch who served the king (38:7–13; 39:15–18).
- d. **Matthew 25:21** "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'
- e. Sometimes you'll try things that flop. You'll attempt to start a small group, you'll come up with a new idea for a ministry project, and it won't seem to go anywhere. No one shows up. It fizzles out. Be faithful, labor, evaluate, plan, but then trust God.
 - i. Many of you are taking on some new ministry challenges – one on one discipleship, leading a small group, serving on the board, teaching Sunday school – how good it is to know that God is responsible for the growth AND He sees and rewards your faithful, God-dependent effort.
- f. Sometimes God chooses to bless a particular work and they experience growth. That church can start to feel like they really have the secret sauce and boast. This passage is the antidote to guard against that kind of pride.

4. They are “fellow workers” (v. 9)

- a. Wallace in his Greek grammar says it is unlikely this is referring to Paul and Apollos as fellow workers *with God* but rather that Paul and Apollos are fellow workers *with one another* belonging to God. That fits the context much better.

iv. But they, the believers, “the church,” belong to God. (v. 9)

- 1. Christian, YOU belong to God. You matter to God. You are loved by God. He wants you to grow and is relentlessly committed to your transformation. Isn't that good news?
- 2. **Philippians 1:6** *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

3. How should we apply this?

- a. Are there things in my life that are **slowing down** my spiritual growth?
- b. Am I contributing to **strife** and **division** in my home or church body?
 - i. Extended hardship can increase strife – covid, caring for a dependent family member near the end of life, prolonging parenting heartache
- c. Look for ways to **invest** in others while **trusting** in the Lord to provide the growth.

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Romans 8:7-9 because the mind set on the **flesh** is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*,⁸ and those who are **in the flesh** cannot please God.⁹ **However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit**, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

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