

*SERIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH*

## **A CRISIS OF JEALOUSY**

**by Doug Goins**

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In preparation for this study, my mind went to a very dear friend whom I've known for about twenty years, who told me a tragic story a few months ago. He had been serving as an elder in a Bible church, but he and his family chose to leave that church when the church split, because the pastor was demanding ultimate and final authority in the congregation. That crisis of leadership gradually developed over a number of seemingly unrelated issues. There was a very emotional facilities controversy over the location of the organ in the front of the auditorium. There was a difficult conflict among the pastor and elders over accountability and mutual submission to one another. There was also a full-blown range war over traditional versus contemporary music styles, robed choirs versus informally dressed worship teams. To have drums or not to have drums, that was the question. Some of it seemed silly, and some of it was obviously serious. But none of those issues in isolation seemed as if it should be sufficient to destroy the unity of a body of believers. The tragic result was a church split, however. About half the congregation drifted off into neighboring churches. The leadership circle was dissolved. The pastor, who had fomented a lot of the issues, was fired. It's a tragedy, and it grieves the heart of God.

That church reflected the same crises of competitiveness and divisiveness that faced the apostle Paul as he wrote this first letter to his spiritual children in the church in Corinth. As we read this passage, see if you can feel his heartbeat, his anguish and loving concern for the brothers and sisters there.

Paul mentions the symptoms that he recognizes in that congregation in the middle of verse 3: "...There is jealousy and strife among you..." The first four chapters of this letter deal with the problem of divisions in the community of faith, and Paul introduced the crisis back in 1:10 (see Discovery Paper 4510): "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." He went on in chapter 1 to identify the factions, cliques, party slogans, and loyalties that indicated several things about them. One was that they over-valued human wisdom, human resources, and human leadership. Another was that they really didn't understand the nature of the gospel-Christ alone, nothing more. That's why they were quarreling. Paul said they were quarreling over cleverness of words, or words of human wisdom. And Paul was convinced in chapter 1 that this was what was behind their difficulty in agreeing.

Human, earthly wisdom is always divided against itself. There are always competing viewpoints on any issue you want to name. Just read the editorial page in the newspaper every day, and you'll see the conflicting opinions. There's an old Jewish proverb that says, "Where you have three rabbis, you will have four opinions."

In chapter 2 Paul explained to the Corinthian Christians the difference between this human wisdom and God's secret, hidden wisdom, which is revealed only to Christians through the work of the Holy Spirit. Human wisdom and God's wisdom are contradictory. The thinking of natural man, or man apart from God in Jesus Christ, is limited to the horizontal plane of human existence. Reality is defined by experience. That's the sum total of it. That perspective is defined and controlled by the world system. Human wisdom is confused, uncertain, subjective, and contradictory in its evaluations of reality. The thinking of spiritual man, to use Paul's language, is unlimited, objective, and comprehensive, because those of us who have a relationship with Jesus Christ have his mind. The Holy Spirit gives believers the spiritual perception to be realistic about life and death, about time and eternity, about human relationships, about the nature of the church itself.

Unfortunately, in the church in Corinth, and in the Bible church that I mentioned above, they were still thinking and acting on human wisdom, on the natural philosophy of the world system. Paul makes it clear that

they should have been controlled by spiritual thinking. They should have been submitted to God's revelation in the Old Testament Scriptures and in apostolic teaching. They should have been thinking like Jesus Christ in their relationships with one another.

The first paragraph of chapter 3 basically has three sections. First, Paul introduces the cause of this crisis, this childish view of life and ministry in the church. He says it's caused by the flesh. They are fleshly instead of spiritual. Second, he mentions three symptomatic issues: jealousy at work among Christians, which explodes into strife or quarreling, and then competitiveness rather than cooperation. Third, the cure is to have a grown-up understanding of life and ministry in the church. It begins with understanding that we are servants, nothing more or less. And servanthood will express itself in cooperation in ministry, not in competition. There is a singular aim for everything that we do and are in the body, and that is to glorify God. Servanthood is based on two wonderful things: equality in the body of Christ, and the grace of God-the riches, resources, and companionship of the Lord himself. We end up with a beautiful statement of identity: We are God's fellow-workers.

## FLESHLY, INFANTILE CHRISTIANITY

Let's look at the cause of the crisis in verses 1-3:

**And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly.**

Let me point out the good news before we talk about the bad news. He does call them brothers and sisters. He does say that they are in Christ, that even though they are still babies, they are part of the family. Paul is saying, in essence, "We're in this together. I'm not talking down to you; we're family who have a common identity." So the issue isn't their status as true Christians, but the degree of their Christian maturity or spiritual perception.

Unfortunately, Paul is saying, they aren't living like spiritual men and women. They aren't mature Christians whose thinking is dominated or controlled by the indwelling Holy Spirit. That's what being spiritual means in Paul's vocabulary. The contrasting word that he uses in the first three verses is the word "flesh." Twice in verse 3 he calls them "fleshly." To be a fleshly Christian is to be dominated by the flesh instead of dominated by the Holy Spirit of God. It is to continue to live our lives, even though we are Christians, on the same sinful principle of self-centered reliance on natural ability that we did before we became Christians.

When we were born physically as babies, we inherited from Adam the flesh, with its natural tendency to sin. When we were born again spiritually-when God gave us new, eternal life in Jesus Christ-he gave us a new spirit and a new heart, and he broke the back of sin. But the tendency toward evil still remains in us.

The Bible talks about our Adamic nature, our natural fallen humanity. Perhaps the best way for us to understand it is as selfishness. The condition Paul pictures here is the egocentricity of a baby. The fleshly Christianity of the Corinthians is infantile.

Let's talk a bit about spiritual infancy. There is nothing wrong with being a newborn in Jesus Christ. That's how we all begin.

My family has had family photo albums scattered around the house for the last month, because both of our daughters have graduated, from high school and from junior high school, respectively. Their friends put together some albums with their baby pictures and pictures of them growing up. Even our twenty-seven year old son Trevor, who was home last weekend, was looking at his old baby pictures. In all of those albums, our children look terrific. They're cute and cuddly, even in the candid shots. You never take bad pictures of babies, do you? I have cute children; it was fun watching them grow up.

But I also have mental images of other scenes that weren't quite so attractive. I remember my children being terrified in the middle of the night by some unknown fear or monster or boogieman. I remember my children

crying in pain because of some illness that they couldn't understand. I have vivid images of one of my children holding her breath until she passed out if she was angry or if she didn't get her way. We didn't take pictures of that. That's not an enjoyable image to remember. All four of my children, as cute as they were as babies, cried loudly and demandingly for food and clean diapers.

Babies believe that they are the center of the universe, and we as parents lovingly accept that as long as they're babies. But if my children, who are now teenagers and adult, continued to live that way, it would be disgusting. That was the problem in this church in Corinth, Paul says. They had a severe case of stunted spiritual growth. Instead of growing up to maturity, the Christians there had remained in a state of spiritual infancy. They weren't able to cope with the grown-up issues that faced them. Part of the reason they couldn't is because they weren't able to receive from the apostle the mature Biblical teaching he offered them about relationship with the Lord and all God intended for them.

In verse 2 Paul describes a babyhood that requires milk instead of meat. The Bible has nothing against spiritual milk. As a matter of fact, it assumes that it's appropriate for spiritual babies to drink spiritual milk. The apostle Peter encourages us this way: "...Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word [of God], that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2). Nursing at a mother's breast stimulates growth in a newborn.

But the author of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament expresses concern about arrested spiritual development: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers [of the word], you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For every one who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." (5:12-14.)

Spiritual milk is the elementary salvation truths of the gospel. It's the message of the evangelist who calls people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. It's the beginnings, the foundational issues, which are very important. But spiritual meat is the Biblical teaching that goes way beyond our conversion. It expands the implications of the gospel to every area of our life. Meaty spiritual teaching relates the Scriptures to us as we grow up in Christ to spiritual adulthood. In the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, it helps us understand our righteousness in the fullest sense-what God is making us, what we will become. It gives us discernment between good and evil. We aren't confused anymore about relativity and moral absolutes. We learn to know what is right and wrong, what is true and false, what is good and healthy and life-giving, and what is destructive.

## COMPETING LOYALTIES

What were the symptoms of spiritual babyhood? Look at verses 3b-4:

**For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?**

Sinful patterns of selfishness, pride, envy, and bickering make us look no different from those who don't have the resources that God gives us in Christ. That's the point of the rhetorical question that Paul asks twice: "Aren't you mere natural men? You're acting just like unregenerate people. You're living no differently from those who don't even know Jesus Christ."

Jealousy and quarreling were normal when our children were little. Thank goodness, they're growing out of their sibling rivalries. My children have a much stronger commitment of love for each other, a greater sense of family unity as they're growing into adolescence and adulthood.

Sadly, that perspective was lacking in the church of Corinth. Their fleshly childishness affected how they viewed the spiritual leaders God had given them, including Paul himself and this young man Apollos. This competition was described in verse 4. We saw back in 1:11 that Paul used the same word, strife or quarreling,

literally bitter or angry words, over competing loyalties to different leaders. That kind of division in a church can happen only when there's fleshly immaturity. The apostle Paul had been the evangelist who founded the church, and there were those who were loyal to him, who trusted and respected him, who liked his style. Apollos came in after him, and there were people who gathered around him because they preferred his teaching. Paul says this is naive, dangerous, and contrary to everything God wants for us.

When my children were very small, they naively identified with heroes, whether it was a sports hero or a Hollywood hero. It was absolute-their hero was the greatest person in the world, even though they didn't have a clue about who the person really was. Likewise, their villains were the worst people in the world. Children also tend to view parental authority in the same naive way, whether it's the school-yard cry, "My dad can beat up your dad," or the swing the other way. When my kids were little it seemed I was either the best dad in the world-hugs and kisses, "We love you, Daddy, you're so wonderful"-or if I disciplined them, the worst: "I hate you, Daddy! You're a terrible father." Children are rarely in the middle. That balance of understanding that I am in the middle, neither the best nor the worst, comes with maturity.

Fleshly, immature people in the church tend to exhibit the same subjective naiveté. They tend to cooperate only with those fellow believers or leaders with whom they happen to agree or who personally appeal to them, flatter them, or in a sense play to their flesh. Factions in the church inevitably result when there is jealousy and strife. When a congregation develops loyalties around individual leaders, it's a sure symptom of spiritual immaturity and of trouble.

Now in these first four verses Paul has been describing pretty ugly things: fleshliness, infantile behavior, jealousy, strife, competitiveness. That church was in trouble. But remember, Paul was an optimist in his view of what God could do through a really messed up group of people like the Corinthians. Look back at 1:4-9: "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

This is the attitude of the heart that's going to speak to us in the conclusion of this section, verses 5-9. In the light of that confidence, Paul offers the cure:

**What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.**

Paul is giving the Corinthians solid food now. This is the meat of the word, the grown-up view of life and ministry in the church. It's an adult understanding of several things. For one, it is an understanding of the fundamental equality of all Christians, including Christian leaders in particular, as Paul mentions himself and Apollos. It's also a call to turn away from looking at ourselves and our needs and our demands, and focus on the Lord. His name shows up six times in the last five verses. He is the only one worthy of glory. When our attention is focused on him, there will be no place for jealousy or strife or self-centered competition. When his mighty presence and power fill our awareness, we're not going to focus on ourselves or on human leaders or human factions.

This is grounded, in verse 5, in understanding what it means to be a servant. Paul says he and Apollos are just servants among the Corinthian Christians whom God used so that they came to believe. Paul and Apollos weren't the source of salvation for the Corinthian Christians. Paul says back in 1:13 that he didn't die for their sins, and they weren't baptized in his name.

He chooses the word "servant" very carefully, because he wants to level the playing field in their understanding of life together in the body. To the Corinthians who wanted to put him up on a pedestal with Apollos and make them super-pastors, he defines their role as menial food service workers, nothing more than waiters or busboys. Paul is saying, in essence, "Nobody builds a movement around a food service worker! Apollos and I were just waiters God used as servants to bring food to you. So don't try to honor us, it's totally misplaced. Give your praise to the One who prepared the food, who understood what your spiritual needs were, and then delivered it through us. The Lord is the one who gave the opportunity for us and for you. God sovereignly placed you where he knew you needed to be to hear the gospel, and he put us there with you."

Servanthood in ministry expresses itself, in verse 6, in cooperation. Paul and Apollos complemented each other in Corinth. Paul was the first one there, the evangelist, the church planter; and when he left, God sent Apollos, the discipler and Bible teacher who continued to build the church up. Paul and Apollos didn't compete with each other at all.

Evangelism and Bible teaching are both human activities ordained of God, but it's only the power of God that can give them any impact. I can preach until I'm blue in the face, but unless the Spirit of God takes whatever truth you hear and integrates it into your life, nothing has happened. God is the one, Paul says in verse 6, who causes growth in life. So if you were to ask what is more important in the church, evangelism or Bible teaching, Paul would say neither one is more important, because God uses them both sovereignly to change people's hearts.

The aim, in verse 7, is to glorify God. This verse is the heart of the paragraph. The language is very literal. Paul says the bottom line is that they are nothing. Logically, then, God is everything. Basically, God doesn't really need any of us to build his church or grow it up. He will do it through people he chooses to use, through those who are well-known and through those who are not. The latter will be the dominant group God uses. Paul does tell us in verse 8 (and other places in the New Testament) that God graciously and lovingly uses each one of us in each other's lives to prepare soil, plant seed, irrigate, cultivate, and harvest. But Paul's point here is that the human being God uses is nothing but an instrument, a tool. All the honor for the accomplishment goes to God. We worship him, not one another. It's not the ministry, and it's not the people. All of that fades into the shadows because of the greatness, goodness, activity, power, and presence of God. He is the one to be glorified, whatever we do together in the body of Christ.

Marc Jacobson and I had breakfast yesterday morning for almost three hours. We talked about twenty years of memories and ministry together, and we both kept finding ourselves saying, "The Lord did it." God was at work sovereignly in ways that we never would have planned. He is the one to be glorified.

## EQUALITY AND GOD'S GRACE

In verses 8-9 there are two more wonderful principles for life and ministry in the body of Christ. First, when Paul says, "...He who plants and he who waters are one..." he is talking about equality in ministry. All of God's servants are equal, or of one purpose. Again, we see the level playing field. There's no inferiority or superiority in ministry roles. There's no hierarchical, top-down authority structure in the leadership of the church. And there are no senior servants or associate servants or assistant servants or servants in training. Paul and Apollos were colleagues in ministry. "Servant" was their title. Each of us has different spiritual gifting and different assignments that God gives us in the body. But that in no way allows us to view another one as more or less valuable or important.

Somebody asked me last week if I'm the senior pastor at PBC now that Ron Ritchie has left. (They ask all the pastors that, not just me.) I explained, "No, we've never had a senior pastor. There's a commitment to Jesus Christ as the Lord of this church, and there is a circle of men in eldership who try to find the mind of the Lord. That's the ultimate leadership, and I work under that authority structure." But I've got to confess, the fact that the person would ask me if I was the senior pastor made me feel good, as if she saw something special in me. But do you know what the apostle Paul would say about that twinge in me? He would call it baby stuff; infantile, fleshly immaturity. It's not what we're called to in the body of Christ.

Verses 8b-9 talk about the grace of God as the basis of whatever we do in ministry: "...But each will receive

his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow-workers...." This ought to be a wonderfully motivating promise of God's commitment to recognize faithfulness in his servants, no matter what their ministry assignment is in the body. We serve a God of gracious, generous provision of whatever physical, spiritual, and emotional resources we need to accomplish the ministry he gives us.

The issue of reward is raised in verse 8. What's the most important pay-off you think you could receive from the Lord? Jewels and crowns and fancy condominiums in heaven? For me at least, the ultimate reward will be hearing the words Jesus spoke in one of the parables, "Well done, good and faithful slave...." (Matthew 25:21,23), the Lord's loving affirmation of what I've done.

Notice that it's going to be based on labor, not on the worldly definitions or external manifestations of success, because God is looking at our heart. Was what we've done driven by love for Jesus and for the people he loves?

The parable of Matthew 20 connects the issues of equality in ministry and the wonderful grace of God. In that story Jesus pictures God as a generous farmer who hires people to work in his vineyard. It demonstrates the equality of our ministries before the Lord, because he determines who works, how long they work, where they work, when they start, when they stop, and how much they're going to get paid. The reason Jesus had to tell this story to his own disciples is because they really thought that they were more important than anyone else, and they ought to have special places in the kingdom (see Matthew 19:27-30). Jesus asks the pointed question, "Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15).

That Corinthian problem of jealousy is cured by understanding that our place, our equality, our usefulness, and our effectiveness in ministry come purely by God's grace. The apostle Paul understood that for himself as well. Later on in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is tempted to compare himself to the original twelve disciples, who were much closer to Jesus and who he felt were superior to him in their spirituality and their effectiveness. But listen to what he says: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (15:10.) Popeye said he was what he was because of spinach. Paul says he is where God put him and who God wants him to be because of the grace and resources of God. That is the basis for ministry.

The last phrase in verse 9 speaks of our being God's fellow-workers. We're his servants and we follow his leading, but we also have his companionship. Every one of us shares that same high privilege, since every one of us is called to the ministry of servanthood in God's field, God's building. Each one of us will contribute in one way or another to the growth of the church, most commonly by touching one life at a time rather than by speaking to large numbers of people. You will have the privilege as a fellow-worker with God to share the life you have in him with others, encouraging, building up, and extending mercy to people. In all of our roles as servants we have the daily companionship of the Lord himself. Do you feel a sense of dignity and worth and value in this kingdom? You are a fellow-worker with the God of the universe, if you have a relationship with Jesus Christ. What an honor to bear his name, to be an instrument of his grace where we live, work, play, and study!

Finally, since it's God's field, God's building, he is responsible for it as the landlord. Ultimately he is in charge, we're not. We work for him. That takes a huge weight off and gives us tremendous freedom to minister and serve, because the buck stops with the Lord. It's difficult to keep that straight. I know how I tend to revert to childishness. We don't have to stay there, though. We can grow up. We can be fed the strong truth of the word of God. We can be given the mind of Christ. We can learn once again what it means to be a servant of all.

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