

ALL THINGS ARE YOURS

SERIES: MOVING ON TO MATURITY



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1 Corinthians 3:1-23
5th Message
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Having just returned from a trip to Kenya with a new awareness of the power of the gospel and the importance of unity in Christ, I am glad to resume these studies in 1 Corinthians. As we have seen, this letter was written to a congregation that was both beloved and frustrating; gifted and immature. Turning now to chapter 3 we note the same tension when the subject is leadership in the church. The final verses of the chapter sound a call that we'd do well to read as a beginning as well as a conclusion.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23:

²¹So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

It is difficult to believe that we have already been given all we will ever need. Our fears and inadequacies loom large. Instead of being grateful we find ourselves drawn to the excitement of the world and the glamour of its celebrities. And yet the text is clear: all things are ours (life or death, present and future) and at the deepest level the Lord provides our identity. We are 'of Christ.'

Our task is to believe what can't be seen and to trust what feels uncertain. In this regard Paul is modeling the nature of godly leadership and urging those who would lead in Corinth to be genuinely Christian. The teaching of chapter three helps us by making use of three word pictures: a child being weaned, a planted field, and a building under construction.

1 Corinthians 3:1-4:

¹Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

Babies are very cute when they are babies, but persistent immaturity is tragic. It is a staple of Hollywood entertainment to tell the 'madcap adventures' of adult men (its usually men) who think and act like they are twelve years old. But no worthwhile person aspires to endless irresponsibility in real life. On a more serious note is the growing concern about today's twenty-somethings who 'fail to launch' from their parents' home, who can't start on a career path, avoid marriage, etc. Paul's question in this letter is similar—why are you Corinthians not ready to live lives of serious discipleship?

There are two descriptions of lasting childishness among the Corinthians that are of particular concern to Paul. One is nursery school behavior: quarreling, grasping, and whining. They ought to be disciples whose lives are shaped by the Spirit and yet they are 'merely human.'

His second concern regards their diet. Mother's milk is only sufficient for a short time. We all need stronger, more complex nourishment—food that is not pre-digested—in order to grow up. In Corinth, both their behavior and their diet are a source of concern.

Regarding spiritual growth, what are milk and meat? They are both necessary and beneficial. But milk should give way to meat just as memorizing the alphabet leads to a lifetime of reading. Consider the great announcement, 'Jesus loves me.' We can feel this love and experience its reassuring warmth when we first come to faith. But the truth of Jesus' love becomes nourishing meat when we grow to understand that his love for us led to his death. We observe the extent of his love as we perceive it in others. Over time we discover that his love is transforming our selfishness into service of others. We learn that his love does not diminish when we are overtaken by sin. Meat is a deeper and more nourishing intake of the good news that led us to faith and the first steps of discipleship.

The danger of a 'milk only' diet is that we don't grow strong enough to fight serious battles or to endure a long season in the wilderness. Truth that doesn't change our thinking becomes little more than a slogan or team cheer. Long time milk drinkers are often fearful when they encounter a complex and changing world.

Further, teaching found in the rest of this letter makes it clear why Paul is passionate about a robust and nourishing gospel. He shines a light, if only briefly, on some of the profound truths that he longs to expound—if only his readers were ‘spiritual’ instead of ‘worldly.’ Believers who remain immature miss out on so much.

For instance, in chapter six Paul challenges ‘sexual immorality,’ but in doing so makes reference to the unity of body and spirit, to the profound reality of ‘two become one,’ to the impossibility of ‘casual sex,’ and to bodies that are destined for resurrection. All of these suggestions point to a ‘meaty’ theology of marriage—yet the Corinthians, who act on every impulse, are not ready for such instruction.

We find similar ‘tip of the iceberg’ references in discussion of the mystery of the Lord’s table (chapters 10 and 11) and the nature of resurrection bodies (chapter 15). 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most cherished descriptions of the nature of love ever written—and yet this beautiful poem only scratches the surface of what the apostle could tell his readers if they had been weaned from mother’s milk.

The second illustration Paul uses in this chapter is a planted field.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9:

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹For we are God’s fellow workers; . . . (that is, fellow workers of one another who both belong to God)

Two important concepts: no one in leadership has every gift and God gets all the credit. We foolishly undervalue folks whose strengths differ from our own. Or, perhaps we are tempted to believe that everything depends on us. In fact, we are God’s servants acting on assignment and he gets the credit when the crops grow. We need each other and all praise goes to him.

I mentioned that I was part of a team that recently returned from a missions trip to Kenya. We partnered with a wonderful community of believers who were diverse in age and growing in faith. Our team was made up of believers with different gifts and life experiences. The Kenyan and

American Christians were different in appearance and dissimilar in personal history. Yet we worshipped and served in wonderful harmony.

Verse 5, “The Lord has assigned to each his task.” We have no say about the day or place of our birth, our genes or families, the doors of opportunity put before us or the spiritual gifts God distributes to each believer. We must learn to be grateful for our calling to serve, not wistful about (perportedly) greener grass in some other place.

Verse 8, “Each will be rewarded according to his own labor.” We are required to be faithful—to trust and obey. Measuring our lives against others gets us nowhere. God lavishly rewards those who have learned to say yes to him without reservation.

The third image in this chapter is a building under construction. Some of the insights in this paragraph are going to be expanded in chapter 4 which we’ll consider in the following message as well.

1 Corinthians 3:9-17:

. . . you are God’s field, God’s building. ¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. ¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

In the previous paragraph Paul highlighted the equally valued contributions of believers with differing gifts. Here he is describing the unique work of the apostles whom Jesus appointed to lay a foundation. There is only one legitimate foundation (v.11). No work of God will last if a false foundation, a different gospel, is employed.

The question of how to build and with what material has to do with people not organizations, physical structures, or good business plans. ‘Gold, silver and costly stones’ are acts of love in real relationships. Instructing the young, upholding the discouraged, praying for the faint, and embracing a friend with joy. This is the heart of Christian leadership: building lives of courageous faith on the foundation of Jesus Christ by speaking the truth in love. I thank God for the mature saints who taught and encouraged me, faithful disciplers, whose lives were a pattern of godliness.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23:

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a “fool” so that he may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”; ²⁰and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.” ²¹So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

These are commands: Do not be deceived. No more boasting about men.

The two weeks I spent traveling to Africa and back was time spent cut off from political reporting and Super Bowl hype. No TV or internet, no Facebook or email. And I didn’t miss any of it. We live amidst a relentless stream of data and the world’s foolish wisdom is hard to tune out. The way forward is not just to damn up the stream but to place a higher value on the gifts of God that are already ours.

1 Corinthians 3:21, 23:

²¹So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours . . . the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

John the Baptist simply sounds a clear note—our marching orders as we conclude, “He must become greater, I must become less” John 3:30.

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