

“GROW UP: LIFE LESSONS FROM FIRST CORINTHIANS

(#1 – VALUING DIFFERENCES)”

(1 Corinthians 1:10-11; 3:1-9a)

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**[Props Needed: (1) Video “*The Juice Box Christian*”**

**(2) Slide of map showing Corinth & Greece]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 9-11-11]

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1. **[BOTH Services use NRSV]** Read Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-11; 3:1-9a and Pray.
2. **[WATCH VIDEO “*The Juice Box Christian*”** (from ShiftWorship.com), Time: 2:08]

A--How “grown up” is *your* faith?

B--You know, there’s a lot of us who seem to be very religious on the surface:...

1--...Each Sunday, we go through our religious motions by going to worship, talking about religious things, using religious language, and acting pious.

2--But then, Monday-Saturday we’re different people: we’re quick to judge, slow to forgive, swift to insist on our own way; we don’t have time to read our Bibles, or pray, or spend time with God.

3--In short, we fail to *live out* the faith that we so passionately profess – we’re like the young man in this video... being content with a faith that’s *immature* and *not “grown up”* at all. <sup>1</sup>

3. Well, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul dealt with Christians in the city of Corinth who were very much like this.

A--And today, as we begin a new sermon series, we’re going to be learning from his advice to these Christians how you & I can “grow up” & “mature” in our own faith.

B--Now, this series will be a bit different from what I usually do:

1--Many of you have requested sermons on a single book of the Bible, so that’s what this series is: ... a study of the advice given by Paul to Christians in one of his letters (“Epistles”) in what we today call the book of First Corinthians.

2--Along with the regular bulletin sermon notes, I’m also providing an **outline** of the entire book (found in the Narthex & on my blog) that you can use as a study guide, and am asking that prior to each Sunday, you read the **homework chapters** (found in your bulletin) to better prepare you for the message.

--II--

4. But before we begin actually looking at Paul’s advice in *today’s* readings (Chapters 1-4), I first want us to understand some **background about the book of First Corinthians** itself.

A--It was written around 55 A.D. (before any of the gospels), which makes it among the earliest of all the writings from the New Testament, and at the time of its writing, the Roman Empire was still growing in power and prestige throughout the Mediterranean.

B--[SHOW MAP ON MEDIA SCREEN...] And the city of Corinth was a commercial and political center, the capital of one of the Roman provinces in Greece, strategically located on an isthmus between two key sea-lanes -- meaning that it controlled one of the main trade routes between Italy, Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) & the Middle East.

1--As such, it was a very cosmopolitan city -- a city of great diversity, wealth and opportunity (much like Atlanta, Los Angeles, or any large metropolitan city).

2--But like most large cities, it was also known to be a center for immorality, sexual promiscuity, and spiritual experimentation. <sup>2</sup>

C--And so, nearly four years before, Paul visited Corinth as part of his “Second Missionary Journey”, made a number of converts and started a new Christian church, led by names that would later become prominent, like Timothy, Silas, Aquila, Priscilla and Titus.

1--And yet, along with the spiritual infancy of these new Christians came the danger of “backsliding” and relapse into their old pagan ways, or at least the danger of them “watering down” the faith that Paul had originally taught.

2--And in fact, that very thing begin to happen, causing controversy and division within this young Corinthian church.

3--So, around 55 A.D. Paul received word about their struggles, and drafted several letters to address the issues in question -- and the book of “First Corinthians” is one of these letters. <sup>3</sup>

D--Within this book, we find Paul’s advice about divisions, morality, and relationships within the church, about worship & the proper use of spiritual gifts,& about the nature & meaning of “resurrection”--all topics that we’ll be addressing together in our series. <sup>4</sup>

--III--

5. Now, today’s two scriptures highlight **The Problem** that Paul is addressing in Chapters 1-4 of this letter (and I encourage you to read these if you haven’t already).

A--In 3:1-2, he refers to the Corinthians as “*infants in Christ... fed with milk, not solid food, for [they] were not ready for solid food*”, and in Verses 3-4, he goes on to list some of its symptoms: “*jealousy*”; “*quarreling*”; and essentially choosing favorites between preachers <sup>5</sup> -- things that *never* happen in today’s church, right? (*Don’t I wish!*)

B--And then, if we read Chapters 1-4 in their entirety, we see other issues at stake: like the nature of Godly wisdom; and what constitutes a true “calling” from God, including Paul even having to justify his own authority as an “Apostle.”

C--But at the heart of all these, Paul implies, is the problem of *spiritual immaturity* that most *immediately* manifests itself through the *DIVISIONS* found in the church.

D--And the reason they struggled with these divisions so much in the first place was because of their great *diversity*.

1--For example, while a few of them were former Jews, most came from Greek or Roman backgrounds, where they’d been steeped in the pluralist, pagan spirituality of the empire, worshipping Isis, Mithra, Cybele, and emperor Caesar.

2--And the Corinthian church was *culturally* diverse, as well: it contained slaves & their masters, artisans & politicians, Patriarchs & Plebians, the rich & poor.

6. Now, diversity in itself is *not* a bad thing. But when people begin thinking that *their* way of being, or doing, or thinking, or worshipping is the only “correct” one, then that arrogance can lead to the same controversy & division that marked the Corinthian church.

A--And if that was true *then*, then don’t you think it’s often true *today*?

B--For example, when you and I don’t value the differences & diversity among us --when we look down our noses at people who are different because of their skin color, or their politics or beliefs, or the side of town they live on, or kind of car they drive, or because of *the style of worship that they prefer* -- then we’ve become Corinthians, too

7. So, what’s **The Solution** to all this, then? How do you and I learn to “*grow up*” and “*mature*” in our Christian faith by learning to “*Value Our Differences*”?

A--Well, in today’s scriptures, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians how to do this -- and by implication, how *we* can do it here today, as well!

1--He actually shares his basic argument in 1:10, where he says “*I appeal to you, brothers & sisters...that you be united in the same mind & the same purpose*”...

2--...And then in 3:5-9 he explains how that applies to the different factions in the Corinthian church by saying that whether they follow himself or Apollos or Peter, all (he says) are merely “*God’s servants, working together*” -- in other words, that they are all “united” around a common source and motivation for ministry (e.g., the desire to share God’s saving love through Jesus Christ).<sup>6</sup>

3--In other words, according to Paul, *controversy and division can be overcome by remembering a shared purpose and calling.*

B--That's why it's no accident that our own church's mission says that we are "*A Mosaic of God's family... Gathering, Growing, and Going*"-- because whether we realize it or not, *that's* what we both ARE and are called to DO...

1--We're a congregation made up of all kinds of diverse people who we don't always understand or agree with.

2--But we're called to value and respect our many differences *so that* we can accomplish our "shared purpose" of **Gathering** and **Growing** in the Lord, empowering us to **Go** into our world to share His hope and love with others.

3--In other words, having a shared sense of purpose and calling helps us as a church to value our differences and minimize controversy and struggle.

8. Now, I need to add that while Paul's solution here was originally written for the *Christian Church*, I believe his advice is equally useful for today's *world at large*, as well.

A--In case you haven't noticed, ours is an increasingly diverse culture: socially, economically, ethnically, politically, spiritually <sup>7</sup> -- "*one size no longer fits all*" could easily be the motto for today's postmodern American culture.

1--And all we need is the anniversary of 9/11/01 to remind us of this -- of how much our society has already changed, and of how much more it's likely to change in the future.

2--In many ways, our entire American society is a mirror of the challenging culture and diversity of Corinth.

B--So, if there was ever a time that we as individuals and as a people needed learn to *value our differences* (rather than struggle against them as the Corinthians did)... it's today!

--IV--

9. You see, Paul's advice in Chapters 1-4 was meant to challenge the arrogance of Christians who thought "their way" was "the only way" when it came to following Christ.

A--It's advice given *not* to water down our uniqueness, or to silence healthy debate on important issues, <sup>8</sup> but to remind us all of the importance of appreciating the diversity that God created us to have by remembering our shared purpose and calling -- ...

B--...To help us "*Grow Up*" in the Lord by learning to "*Value Our Differences*" in Christ.

10. [PRAYER: "*O God, forgive us for the many times and many ways that we as your children have been immature in our faith, and a poor witness to our world, by arrogantly assuming that "our way" is "best," by often quarreling with our sisters and brothers over*

*petty issues, and by questioning your call or your work in the lives of others. Help us to be confident and firm in our faith in you, but at the same time to honor, respect, and value not only our own uniqueness, but also that of others by not insisting that they must always act or think or believe or worship like us. Help us to learn from your servant Paul how to “grow up” and mature in you by valuing our differences, and by remembering our shared purpose and calling in you. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.”]*

11. Next week’s **Homework Chapters: Read Chapters 5-7**

**ENDNOTES:**

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<sup>1</sup> We fit well the description which says that “*some people have just enough Christianity to inoculate them against the real thing.*”

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Greek word “*korinthiazestai*” (literally “*to live like a Corinthian*”) had become a common catch-phrase to describe people living in drunkenness and debauchery.

<sup>3</sup> And even though our Bible now only contains two “Corinthian” books (1 and 2 Corinthians), Paul may have originally written as many as three or more letters to address the Corinthian issues. For example, read 1 Corinthians 5:9, where Paul refers to a “*previous letter*” that he wrote (even though the place we put it is in *First Corinthians* - obviously there was another letter *prior* to this one!). Some scholars think that all or a portion of 2 Corinthians is actually contains the “*previous letter*” (such as 2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1).

First Corinthians itself has been called by various nicknames, all of which testify to its responsive nature: “The Book for Church Disorders,” “The Book of Carnal Vs. Spiritual Christian Living,” “Living by the Spirit of God,” “The Epistle of Gifts,” and others.

<sup>4</sup> As a result, it could be said that the basic theme of the entire book of First Corinthians is “***Growing up(or Maturing) in Christ-like faith and practice.***” Please note that although Paul’s letter is addressed to *new* Christians in a *new* church, his advice here is equally appropriate and applicable for *any* church or individual Christian who is still “stuck” in issues and symptoms commonly found in “immature” stages of spirituality.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of “*quarreling*” is repeated in Chapter 1:11, as well.

<sup>6</sup> This point is also clear in Chapter 1:17, where Paul indicates that the spreading of the gospel is more important than being right or having your side win (e.g., to him there, “*proclaiming the gospel*” is more important than getting caught up in who was baptized by Paul or by someone else).

It should be noted that in Chapter 3, Paul uses three metaphors to illustrate his idea that the purpose of the whole (e.g., God’s Church) is more important than the work of the individual parts (e.g., the ministry of specific preachers/evangelists): a “field” (an agricultural metaphor, Verses 6-9a); a “building” (an architectural metaphor, Verses 9b-15); and a “Temple” (a metaphor probably aimed at former Jews who have now become God’s new “Temple” in Christ, Verses 16-17).

<sup>7</sup> For example, just several weeks ago you may have read in USA Today that as of this year, there are now more “minority” babies born in America than white/Caucasian, so that in the near future, white/Caucasians will for the first time be the minority ethnicity in an increasingly ethnically diverse

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American society. In addition, the economic gap between rich and poor in America is increasing, and our communities are divided over controversial political issues like health care reform and same-sex unions. We have also become an increasingly diverse religious society, as well -- the anniversary of 9/11/01 serves to remind all of us of how little we actually know about religions other than our own.

<sup>8</sup> We can (and should) still engage each other in healthy dialogue and debate on important issues of theology, politics, the economy, etc. However, we should do so in a spirit of humility, honor, and respect for those with whom we disagree, never being condescending, or arrogantly presuming ours is the “only way.”