

Grow Up: Life Lessons From First Corinthians

#3 – Others First

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-33; 11:1

Study Text: Chapters 8-11

The Details Get Complicated - Background

As we crossed into Oklahoma a week ago, there was no “Welcome to Oklahoma” or any similar sign. The only sign read, “Entering the Cherokee Nation.” What an odd feeling to realize that we were in an area where we really did not belong. A nation with a very different history and culture than ours. It always takes some adapting when we are in the Cherokee Nation, and our questions seem endless. I want to know about them and their culture, but what we often learn is how much their culture has been affected by ours.

In the past two weeks, Brian has reminded us of Paul’s admonition to value our differences and to gain a better understanding of what a Godly relationship should look like. As we enter our third week of study in First Corinthians, we realize that a clash of cultures and religious practices is what the Apostle Paul is dealing with in this portion of his letter to the Church at Corinth. The new Christians in Corinth were having difficulty in the midst of old forms of worship and sacrifices to idols that non-Christians continued to practice. Paul gives them a little help in finding new ways to relate to others who are immature in the faith or have not accepted Christianity at all.

In Chapter 8, the issue is whether Christians should eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul basically says it does not matter, but he makes the more important point that others look to Christians as having knowledge of God, so our actions are more influential than we would like them to be. Don’t eat meat, Paul said, if it will cause another to stray and confuse them in the faith.

In Chapter 9, he encourages Christians to be mature but don’t be a show-off about it. Pride in your relationship with God can cause serious problems for those attempting to work out their faith. Paul encourages them in Chapter 10 to learn from Israel’s experiences with idolatry. And in Chapter 11, Paul denounces the divisions among them as they come, telling them what worship should be and recalling the words of Jesus at the institution of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.

Today, we will use selected verses from Chapters 10 and 11 to see how our actions and behaviors affect the lives of others. We also hear Paul telling us that consideration for others is more important than any consideration for ourselves. In our assigned study text for today (Chapters 8-11), Paul discusses Christian freedom and how we should use Christian freedom in ways that always place others first.

Christian Freedom and Responsibility

Christian freedom does not mean that anything goes. Everything is not permissible, but rather we must devote ourselves to that which is beneficial and constructive. In our judgment, we should seek that which is for the good of others. We should participate in those things that build up those around us.

Paul argues that freedom is not freedom unless you can give it up. In his discussion of what food is acceptable to eat in Chapter 8 to his discussion of idols, worship, and Holy Communion in the following chapters, Paul carefully notes that Christians should avoid putting emphasis on those things that become an impairment to the faith and belief of others. Don't get hung up on things that have no eternal significance. Don't exercise freedom to the detriment of faith. That is, do not abuse the freedom you have in Christ to sin more, knowing that your confessed sins will be forgiven you. That makes it all about you. Paul says it is not about you. It's about others and finding ways to show them Christ.

As we entered the Cherokee Nation, I felt the sense of confusion that the Corinthian Christians must have felt. I am in the USA. I know this is Oklahoma. Yet, this is the Cherokee Nation. We who belong to the Kingdom have a responsibility to sacrifice our freedoms, if we must, to be effective examples to those who might not yet know Christ. We must, as Paul said, try to find common ground with everyone to spread the good news and allow others to share in its blessings. (9:22-23)

It's Not About Us

We often are not "others" oriented. When did you last talk about "my church or my team or my...?" This time between September 1 and the end of the year is a particularly difficult time for Christians reading this letter to the Corinthian Church. Paul says put others first. How can you do that when we are screaming for our favorite team? How can we do that when we have competitions for the World Series, BCS rankings, college bowls, high school championships, or even the prize at the fair? How do we get there when we are a divided nation becoming more divided by heated political rhetoric? We are naturally self-centered people, even when we are trying to live the Christian life. Not only is that a problem, according to Paul, but it causes others to doubt our faith when they see us so centered only on the things that interest us and benefit us.

As we look to the holidays, we will begin to consider what we want for a gift this year. We will sing songs of peace; we will gather with our church family and other family members; and we will give to the poor and to the church, but mostly it will be about us. Some have said that we need to rediscover a sense of "family" to renew the church. We do not need to rediscover "family" to be an effective example to the world. We need to rediscover our missional identity which Christ gave us in the beginning. When our brothers and sisters went to Honduras and Kenya this year, they immersed themselves in the culture – not because that was their preference, but because they could reach people meeting them in their own place and culture. Many people will never come here to this building. Do we write them off because they will not? The call to the Disciples was to come, but the Great Commission was to go! We only want to do the coming part.

We do not want to engage the world as it is and the people where they are. Yes, we have had mission trips and outreach opportunities to Kenya, Honduras, Mountain Top, Metro Atlanta Project (MAP), Ft. Hill, etc., but most of us are content to be here and move in the same circle of friends every week.

Paul admonishes the Corinthian Church and, by extension all of us, to find a better way. Be tolerant of the practices of others that do not affect their salvation. Be with others even though you may not agree with what they are doing or how they believe. If we condemn their sins, flaunting our supposed righteousness before them, and then proceed to sin ourselves (as we are bound to do), we offend them with our hypocrisy. We cannot condemn a man for lying, testify that our faith has given us new life free from it, and then lie to another – even for good intent. It *offends* the common man when we claim to be holy and then disprove our claims so blatantly.

Being In the World But Not Changed By It

We will never change our world by preaching to it. We must immerse ourselves in it. Our lives and our practices should be motivated by getting more people to come to Christ, not just come to church. Jesus said, “If I am lifted up, I will draw all people unto me.” (John 12:32). Our call is to lift up Christ. He will do the rest. Lift up Christ, and then get out of the way. We would be amazed if we could give up enough of our freedom and self-centeredness to do that.

The true danger of following Paul’s example is our limited maturity in the faith. If we are not prepared and strong, the world may change us more than we change the world. The Cherokee Nation started at a tremendous disadvantage, having been displaced and driven from their ancestral home by the US Government. Today, most of them look and act more like us than the Cherokee of years ago, but the disadvantages are profound. We are influenced by the surroundings in which we find ourselves. Only those steeped in the Cherokee traditions can keep them going, and they are slipping away. Similarly, only those who are mature in the faith can place themselves in a hostile world without being forever changed by it. That’s why you are here: To grow in the faith, so that you can be a faithful example even in the face of a world that says otherwise.

The Golden Rule? How About A Better Way?

Most of you remember the Golden Rule. Jesus even gave us a form of it: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7:12). There is the Platinum Rule (not in scripture) that says: Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto them. There is the Iron Rule (also not in scripture): Do others *before* they do you. Do you realize that even the Golden Rule still puts us at the center? It’s still all about us. The subject is others, but we are still the center of the conversation. Jesus came to turn all of that on its head. Paul picks up on this new approach by Jesus and drives it home to the Corinthians and all of us. Remember how Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13:34-35). *Do to others as I have done to you*, and they will notice. They will ask why. They will not be tripped up by the rules, the ritual, the contradictions that we are. They will hear, “I am a sinner, too,

but this is my Savior.” “I make mistakes, and I have problems, too; but there is one who understands – one who gives me strength in my times of weakness.”

The question now presents itself: Why should I give up my liberty in Christ? The answer is given quite succinctly in Romans 15:1-2 (ESV):

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

Our faith gives us liberty but our faith demands that we respect those who have limited themselves in their freedom. Paul gives an even greater reason to do so with those who are not yet of the church: that they might be saved. For through the demonstration of God’s love in our lives and through the power of His liberating faith, we may yet show that God is a God of freedom.

Paul says in our scripture today, “Don’t be concerned for your own good, but for the good of others.” (v. 24). And, “...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God....I do what is best for others so that they may be saved. And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.” (vs.10:31-11:1). Do all you do for the glory of God and the building up of others. That’s why we are here.

Prayer

Study Text for Next Week: 1 Corinthians 12-14

Endnotes:

My sincere thanks to Rev. Dr. Brian Germano for sharing his study notes on First Corinthians which were used as background reading in the preparation of this sermon.

Sometimes it is hard to know when to defer to weaker believers. Paul gives us a simple rule of thumb: We should be sensitive and gracious. The goal here is not a general hypersensitivity that worries about what others will think. Rather, it is a general awareness of others and a willingness to limit what we do when there is a real possibility of misunderstanding or offense. Some actions may not be wrong, but they may not be in the best interests of others. We have freedom in Christ, but we should not exercise that freedom at the cost of hurting a Christian brother or sister.

Making choices in sensitive situation - some questions to ask when choosing a course of action:

1. Does it help my witness for Christ? (Ch. 9:19-22)
2. Am I motivated by a desire to help others to know Christ? (Ch. 9:23; 10:33)
3. Does it help me do my best? (Ch. 9:25)
4. Is it against a specific command of scripture and would therefore cause me to sin? (Ch. 10:12)
5. Is it good and helpful? (Ch. 10:23; 33)
6. Am I thinking about myself, or do I really care about the other person? (Ch. 10:24)
7. Will it encourage someone else to sin? (Ch. 10:32)
8. Does it glorify God? (Ch. 10:31)

Paul's criteria for his actions were not what he liked best but what was best for those around him. The opposite approach would have been would be (1) being insensitive and doing what we want, no matter who is hurt by it; (2) being oversensitive and doing nothing for fear that someone might be displeased; (3) being a "yes" person by going along with everything, trying to gain approval from people rather than from God. In this age of "me first," and "looking out for number one," Paul's statement in v. 33 is a good standard. If we make the good of others one of our primary goals, we will develop a serving attitude that pleases God.

Why do you think Paul said, "Imitate me"? Paul was not being arrogant. He did not consider himself sinless. The Corinthian Church at this time knew little about Jesus other than what Paul told them. There were no Gospels to read. They had not yet been written. The best way for Paul to point these new Christians to Christ was to point them to a Christian whom they trusted. Paul had been in Corinth for two years and had built a relationship of trust with many of these new believers.