

“GROW UP: LIFE LESSONS FROM FIRST CORINTHIANS
(#5 – IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU)”
 (1 Corinthians 15:58-16:3)
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[PROP NEEDED: White linen napkin for Napkin metaphor]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 10-9-11]

--I--

1. **[BOTH Services read NRSV version]** Read Text: 1 Corinthians 15:58-16:3 and Pray.

A--The iPhone, iPad, iTunes, YouTube, meTv, the “I-Plan,” “*Have it your way*” -- from a very young age, we as a society are saturated with the notion that life should be built around each of us and our own individual needs.

1--Every year, as much as \$440.4 billion is spent on media advertising and marketing that attempts to “sell” this perspective to us. ¹

2--And it manifests itself in everything from kids “Happy Meals”, to mobile apps and ads geared towards our teenagers, to the development of consumer *expectations* that we have as adults regarding services in business, restaurants, government, and even what we expect from our churches.

B--In a manner of speaking, you see, we tend to be a very “narcissistic” culture -- a culture infatuated with *ourselves*, thinking that life should be all about *me, myself & I*.

2. Well, today as we wrap up our Bible study sermon series on the book of First Corinthians, we come to a culture that’s not much different from our own.

A--Like ours today, the Roman society of Paul’s day was flooded with things that centered around the perceived needs of individuals -- like the gladiator games in the coliseums throughout the Empire, or the obsession that they had with pleasure spas.

B--And this was so much of who they were that, like us today, a good slogan for Roman culture could have been “*It’s All About Me!*”

C--And since the Christians in Corinth were coming out of this narcissistic background, in the final two chapters of his letter to them (Chapters 15-16), Paul addresses those who’ve fallen back into their old, selfish ways by challenging them to “Grow Up” in their faith by remembering that life is *not* all about them.

D--And I believe that his words of advice written to a selfish society 2000 years ago can help us in *our* selfishness today, as well.
 (*Sermon notes in bulletin; Past sermons, study outline, & Bible Study notes in Narthex & on my blog*)

--II--

3. To see how he does this, let’s begin by looking at each chapter one at a time.

A--First of all, in Chapter 15 Paul responds to questions he was asked in a previous letter concerning the nature, purpose, and meaning of “Resurrection” (both the Resurrection of Jesus *and* the resurrection of Christian believers after they die).²

1--Evidently, some Corinthian Christians were questioning whether or not they or other believers would be raised from the dead at the last day.

2--So, in the first part of this chapter (Verses 1-11), Paul talks about the resurrection of *Jesus* as a way to teach about the nature of resurrection itself, and to affirm that Christian believers *can* be raised, as well.³

3--Then, for the rest of the chapter (beginning with Vs. 12), he uses logic to argue for the reality of resurrection among believers, and gives (in Verses 35-58) a detailed description of what he believes that resurrection will look & feel like.⁴

B--Moving on to Chapter 16, we find Paul essentially wrapping up his entire letter.

1--He begins (Verses 1-4) by giving instructions about what he calls his “*collection for the saints*,” which is essentially an offering he’s taking in all the Mediterranean churches to help needy Christians in Jerusalem.⁵

2--He then goes on to describe his upcoming travel plans (Vss. 5-12), shares a few greetings, and gives a general exhortation for all the Corinthian Christians to continue “growing up” by standing firm in their faith (Vss. 13-24).

4. Now, on the surface it doesn’t seem like Chapters 15-16 have any connection to *each other*, much less to the overcoming of selfish faith. But this is where today’s scripture (15:58-16:3) helps us:

A--You’ll remember Vs. 58 says, “*Therefore... be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord...[knowing] that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*”

1--We need to understand that the word “*therefore*” in this verse connects Paul’s challenge to “*excel in the work of the Lord*” with what was written before it, which were all of his arguments for the reality of resurrection for believers.

2--He telling the Corinthians, in other words, that since there *is* a resurrection, “*therefore*” they should focus on doing *God’s* work (not *their own* work -- what’s comfortable/convenient to *them* -- but “*the work of the Lord*”), knowing that “*your labor is not in vain*”(i.e., because they’ll one day experience resurrection).⁶

3--It’s as if Paul was saying that, “*Since our existence is not only about what happens in this life but also what happens in our resurrected life with God after death, then we need to act like it now -- in this life -- by not living selfishly, but by living for God.*”

B--Then, in the first three verses of Chapter 16, he immediately gives an example of how they can “live out” this self-less focus: by collecting an offering for the needy “*saints*” of the church in Jerusalem.

1--So, this “*collection*” was Paul’s way of getting the Corinthians to think outside *themselves* & their *own* needs in order to instead consider the needs of *others*.

2--He knew (as Jesus had taught) that when we *give* to other and *serve* others, we’re not only helping *them*, but we’re also saving *ourselves* from the dangers of an “I/me”-centered life -- we’re protecting ourselves from our own destructive narcissism.

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5. Paul is saying to them (and to us) that a mature, “grown up” life in the Lord is “not about us,” but is instead about finding ways to live *for God* in how we serve and give ourselves to *others* -- that the antidote to a selfish, self-centered life is *Servanthood* and *Giving*.

A--This is why our church offers things like our annual “Great Day of Service” (that over 150 of you participated in yesterday):... *not* just to make a difference in the lives of *others*, but also to provide *us* with a tool that can keep *us* from becoming egotistic.

B--It’s why we’re having an “Ministry Showcase” today after both morning worship services:... *not* just to *educate* us about the programs/ministries our church offers, but to invite all of us to *get involved*, *so that* we don’t become vain or conceited.

C--It’s one reason we pass an offering basket/plate each week in worship:... *not* just to pay utility bills, or salaries, or even to fund ministries, but to give us all a chance to be part of something bigger than ourselves,... and by doing so, find healing for (and protection from) self-centeredness.

D--Now, does this mean it’s wrong to *ever* focus on ourselves?

1--Of course not! There are times where it’s not only appropriate but absolutely *necessary* for us to focus on our own needs in life.

2--But Paul is clear that we should never let *those* times drown out our call to serve *others* (as it had with the Corinthians, who were *mostly* living for *themselves*).

6. You see, Paul is teaching in Chapters 15-16 that when you and I serve and give to others, it shifts our focus away from *ourselves*, and helps us realize our connection to them.

A--It helps us recognize that if we want our world to change for the better, then *we* have a responsibility to make it happen -- that life is *not* solely about *us*, but also about what *we* can do to make a difference in the life of someone *else*.

B--[NAPKIN METAPHOR] Retired Methodist pastor John Ed Mathison once shared a metaphor I’ve never forgotten for the difference between a self-*ish* & a self-*less* life:

1--He said that too often in our world (and also even in the church), we act as if Life should be centered around us [TUCK NAPKIN IN SHIRT UNDER CHIN]

2--For example, we come to church to be “fed” -- for the preacher and leaders to give us worship and teaching that’s entertaining, makes us feel good, and “fills us up” like a good meal -- and if we’re not satisfied, we get all upset!

3--And yet, the metaphor Jesus gave his disciples (in the Upper Room in John 13) was not one *being served / fed*, but of *one who serves* [KNEE and MOVE NAPKIN TO OUTSTRETCHED ARM]...

4--You see, your church (this church) exists *not* to serve you and your needs -- to make you comfortable and convenient -- but to invite, challenge, and equip both you and me to serve others.

C--As Paul taught the Christians at Corinth in today’s reading, you see, a “Grown Up” life in the Lord is not about us, but about others. So, how will *you* answer God’s call to serve?

7. [PRAY: “*O God, forgive us for the many times that we’ve gotten caught up in the mindset and mentality of the world which says that we should be most concerned with getting our own needs met. Forgive us that even in our own church, we’ve often been more concerned with whether something is comfortable and convenient for us than whether or not it’s bringing people into your kingdom. As Paul did with the Corinthians, keep us mindful that since there’s more to our existence than just getting our needs met in this life, that what we do here and now should always include a focus on swerving and giving to others. Help us to “grow up” in our faith by inviting your Holy Spirit to give us the strength and ability to serve and give to others. We pray this in the name of the one gave us the greatest example of servanthood, your son Jesus, Amen.*”]
8. [Invite congregation to visit “Ministry Showcase” booths after service]

ENDNOTES:

¹ The exact amount spent on U.S. advertising and marketing is debated, based on what data is used. This obviously results in differing figures. For example, according to Magna Global Director of Forecasting for Madison Avenue Brian Wieser, U.S. spending on ad-supported media in 2009 was \$161 billion (data from an article from July 14, 2009 in “Media Daily News”, cited at http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.printFriendly&art_aid=109734). On the other hand, according to Outsell, Inc., \$412.4 billion was spent on advertising and marketing in the US in 2008 (cited at <http://www.intenseinfluence.com/blog/how-much-money-is-spent-on-advertising-per-year>). Other sources cite figures somewhere in between these two, but whatever the “exact” figure, it is obviously a *large sum!*

² In this chapter, Paul makes it clear that: (1) belief in the resurrection of Christ is fundamental to belief in the resurrection of all believers; (2) belief in the resurrection of all believers is fundamental to belief in the resurrection of Christ; and (3) both of these beliefs are fundamental to the Christian faith itself. In a sense, he is using a paradox (a cyclical, “which came first: chicken or egg?” argument) to explain *why* belief in resurrection of the dead is so important.

³ It's as if Paul used Jesus' resurrection appearances to say to the Corinthian Christians: "*Look, all of these people saw that Jesus was raised, so why should you doubt that you or any other Christian could be raised yourselves?*"

⁴ Verses 42-49, for example, essentially give the details of the character and *nature* of believer resurrection: it gives believers a "body" (Greek *soma* or "*mode of being*") that will be *uniquely suited* to the eternal roles we will play in heaven with God, and that this "body"/ mode of being will be fundamentally *different* from the one we have now because our purpose and function in creation will have changed.

⁵ This collection is also referenced in Galatians 2:7-10, Acts 24:17, & 2 Corinthians 8:18-19. Paul's emphasis here upon the shared nature of the church reminds us about our connection to (and responsibility with) the church around the world. It reminds us that local churches and congregations must look after more than simply the needs of their own communities and contexts – that we are, in a sense, "connectional" = connected to each other and to Christ through the church. It should be pointed out that these verses reveal the principle behind the United Methodist system of connectional giving to help others called "Apportionments."

⁶ For the Corinthian Christians struggling to live a genuinely Christian life amid the immorality of Corinth, Verse 58 reminds them of a great hope: that their struggle, labor, and hard work to be faithful to the Lord in that culture is not in vain: there are *rewards* to come in the resurrection of believers *if* they will but continue to focus on "*the work of the Lord*," rather than merely on their own selfish desires.