

## 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9

### INTRODUCTION

From chapter 1:18 to 2:5 Paul has been comparing worldly wisdom with God's wisdom. Last time we looked at why people cannot accept God's wisdom. It is because such wisdom is spiritually perceived. (2:6-16). But even when our eyes have been opened it is so easy to be influenced by the worldly wisdom that is promoted all around us.

Such worldly wisdom when accepted and applied in the church causes divisions, which is exactly what, was happening in the church at Corinth. Now Paul turns his attention to the divisions in the church and he tells us about the cause, the symptoms and the cure for such divisions.

### 1. THE CAUSE OF DIVISION (vs. 1-3)

The reason there was division in the church at Corinth was not just because of the influence that pagan Corinth had on the church but it had more to do with the inward spiritual condition of the people. Yes the church had succumbed to the pressures of the world but they were also succumbing to their own sinful nature, which was making them worldly Christians.

But before Paul rebukes and corrects the church for their immature sinfulness he reminds them again that he is speaking to them as brothers' (v 1) he is speaking to them as a fellow believer. The use of 'brothers' is a term of recognition and of love. It reminded the Corinthian Christians that although there is much in their lives that the Lord and indeed Paul did not approve of nevertheless they are still Christian believers.

Therefore Paul loves them with a Christian love. Paul did not try to diminish the seriousness of their sins but he wants them to realise that in spite of their sin they are still his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and are therefore dear to him and to all other believers. He wants them to realise that he is rebuking them because he is their brother and therefore loves them in Christ rather than being a judge to them.

There is an important lesson here in passing. Every Christian fails to live up to their name. Some seem to fail more often and some are more careless and apathetic but we must never be tempted to think of them or of ourselves as anything else other than Christian people. We might sin frequently and seem to stumble from one sin to another but if we have experienced God's grace in our lives then we are our brothers and sisters and that is how we are to treat them.

However we must also note that true brothers and sisters will gently and graciously seek to rebuke one another for their sins not as a judge but as a brother.

As Paul thinks about the Corinthians he could not refer to them as spiritual people, yes they had embraced faith in Christ but it seems that they have gone no farther. Many of these Corinthians would have been Christians for quite a few years now but yet they were acting as if they had just come to faith in Christ for they were mere infants in Christ.

When Paul uses the word 'spiritual' here he does not mean that they are not Christians but that they are not living up to their Christian profession they are not acting as mature Christian people but as little baby Christians. The word that is translated as 'worldly' is literally the fleshly ones. In this context the word is referring to the sinful nature of the Corinthian Christians.

When one becomes a Christian our sinful nature is not eradicated, it can no longer dominate, control or destroy us but it can and does still influence us and the more we give into it then the more influence it will have in our lives. When we give in to it and sin then in a practical way we are

being unspiritual for we are doing what those who are unspiritual do that is those who do not possess the Holy Spirit.

We are of course spiritual for we possess the Spirit but practically we are unspiritual doing on the practical level what unbelievers do. It is this giving in to their sinful nature that made these Corinthians infants in Christ rather than mature believers. They are still in Christ united to Him by faith, but they are not growing, as they should because they are giving in too often to their sinful nature.

We need to heed Paul's rebuke here. Perhaps for at least some of us we have been Christians for many years and yet if we are honest with ourselves we are still living like baby Christians. We have sat under the preaching of God's word for many years but we never seem to act upon it. Far too often we have good intentions when we leave here on a Sunday but those intentions soon vanish when it comes to Monday morning.

What is it that causes this to happen why is it that we do not grow, as we should as Christian people? Here lies the reason or at least part of the reason. We are far too worldly we give in to our sinful nature too easily and therefore we live like our unbelieving neighbours and friends. We are still Christians we are united to Christ by faith but we simply are not growing, as we should because we give in to our sinful nature and indulge it far too often.

We should never condone our sin, we should never excuse our sin but we should always deal with it and ask God by his grace to give us a godly determination not to give in to our own sinful nature. Of course the key to this is daily obedience to the Lord. It means taking God's word seriously so that we are not just hearers of the word of God but are doers of his word.

The more we actively obey God's word then the more we will find ourselves resisting our sinful nature. The truth is the more we submit ourselves to the Lord and to his authority in our lives then the less we will sin and consequently the more we will grow in grace.

When Paul first preached at Corinth he taught them the basic truths of the gospel and of the Christian faith. What Paul calls the milk (v 2)? But now probably about five years later they still needed to be fed the milk of the word when they should be on solid food. Like many Christians in our own day the Corinthians seemed quite content to stay on the milk the basics of the Christian faith.

There are some Christians who don't want their Pastor or preacher to be too deep when preaching the things of God. They like to hear again and again the basic Christian truths but they don't want to have to think and explore those truths further. There is no difference at all between the milk and solid food in content except that the solid food will be more detailed and has more depth to it.

All God's truth is milk and solid food at the same time. When someone first becomes a Christian they will understand the basic elements of the gospel they might only know they are sinners and Christ died for them. That is true and that is the basic teaching of the bible.

However as they grow in their Christian thinking they will develop and begin to explore what it means to be a sinner further and what Christ dying for them really means. So they will begin to learn more about the greatness, majesty and holiness of God that makes sin so offensive.

They will begin to learn about Christ taking the wrath of God upon himself and that this was God's plan from eternity etc. The basic truths are still there but the growing Christian is beginning to move from the spiritual milk to the solid food of God's word. Solid food does not mean that we are constantly learning new truth and new doctrines. No it's just that we are learning more about those doctrines and truths.

I wonder if we were to do a spiritual health check what would we find. Are we still on spiritual milk or are we longing for more solid food. As a preacher and Pastor I am responsible before God for giving you both. But you as members of this church and as a congregation are responsible for using the God ordained disciplines, so that you will grow in grace.

There is nothing as sad as seeing a Christian who has been saved for years and yet they still have very limited knowledge of the great truths of the Scriptures. It is sad to see a Christian who should be mature in the faith yet he or she is immature in the way that they act and live out their faith.

If you fit into this category then the reason Paul gives is that you are still worldly you are giving into your own inward sinful nature rather than submitting yourself to the authority of God's word. You are doing your own thing too often instead of obeying the word of God and this was causing division in Corinth.

## 2. THE SYMPTOMS OF DIVISION (vs. 3-4)

Immature Christians who are still on the basic Christian food instead of the solid food that they ought to be on will express their immaturity in the life of the church. They give in easily to their sinful desires and therefore their actions display their immaturity. It was seen in Corinth through the jealousy and quarrelling that existed and went on within the church.

Jealousy is an attitude and quarrelling is an action that results from that attitude. Both attitude and action displays selfishness, because it's all about having my way. These two sins are representative of many more that arise within churches when there are far too many immature Christians especially as those who are immature should really be mature and godly people.

Selfishness is seen in many ways in churches but it will eventually destroy a church if left unchecked. It will corrupt morals, weaken personal relationships and ultimately it produces doubt about God and his word. Unless it is dealt with within our own hearts first and foremost and then in the life of the church as it raises its head in many different ways and in many different forms.

But let us just think about the two symptoms as it affected the church at Corinth. Jealousy and quarrelling caused division within the church at Corinth and it is inherently seen in immature children. You see it in young toddlers who cry when they are not getting the attention and someone else is receiving it. You see it in the playground of school where one envies another because they have a new toy or new shoes etc.

When jealousy is displayed in the church then it is because of immaturity you are still on milk when you should be on solid food spiritually speaking. Another person gets attention in the church and you resent it because you want that attention. Someone else is given a task to do that you want to do.

Someone else is given praise and you resent it because you want to be at the centre of it all. Such attitudes are a sign of immaturity and it needs to be rooted out of our lives by submitting to the word of God.

Likewise quarrelling is often caused by immature people within churches. These are people who will only co-operate with those that they agree with or personally get along with or feel some affinity with. Therefore quarrels develop sometimes over the most unimportant things or sometimes over people as at Corinth. In Corinth loyalties developed around individuals.

Some factions were loyal to Paul and saw him as their leader; others were loyal to Apollos and thought him the better leader. The truth is that neither Paul nor Apollos encouraged or desired

such loyalty and in fact would have condemned it but nevertheless it developed as a result of worldly and immature Christians within the church.

It's easy in churches to favour one leader or one Christian over others. It might be that your personality seems to gel with a particular leader or Christian in the church whereas it seems to rub others up the wrong way. It might be that one Christian thinks similarly to you in some matter that concerns you but other Christians do not see it your way.

Quarrels can so easily arise but the real spiritual reason why they arise in churches is because of immaturity. It is because some Christians who should have grown to be mature Christians are still acting like little children.

Such Christians are giving in to their sinful desires and nature rather than submitting to the word of the living God. If there are any such people here today then you must repent of these sins and seek under God to learn more about the basic truths that you love and seek to obey God's word by putting it into practise in every area of your life.

Paul says that when there is jealousy and quarrels in the church then Christians are living like unbelievers rather than Christ loving people (v 4).

### 3. THE CURE FOR DIVISION (vs. 5-9)

The cure for the division in any church is to turn away from self and set our eyes on God. When our attention is drawn to and focused upon the Lord then there will be no time or desire for division. When our attention is on Him it cannot be on others or self. Paul reminds the church that he and Apollos were merely servants whom the Lord used to bring the Corinthians to faith in Christ (v 5). They were nothing more than instruments used by God; they were not the source of the salvation of the Corinthians. So how can the church have favourites Paul and Apollos are on equal terms both were servants used by God to bring salvation and growth to the people of Corinth?

That is true in every church. Sometimes if God has used a particular person to bring you to salvation we can have a loyalty to that person that is above our loyalty to the Lord. But we must always remember that each one of us are only servants of the Lord, we might have been privileged to have been used by God in building his church but we are at best servants.

We all have our own God appointed tasks to do. Paul planted the seed of God's word Apollos had watered it, they had been faithful in doing what they were asked to do but the important thing is that only God made his seed grow (v 7). Paul never saved anyone from their sin. Apollos never forgave anyone their sin or died for anyone but God has saved the Corinthian believers by forgiving them through the death of his Son on their behalf.

At the end of the day the one who plants or the one who waters is nothing, because without God who alone brings growth the planting and the watering would come to nothing. You see why divisions occur in the church; because we promote self. The cure is to see ourselves as unimportant just servants doing what God has called us to do.

Therefore the real cure is to focus on the Lord who brings growth. The church should not be full of self important people but it should be full of servants doing their bit for the Lord and having their eyes firmly fixed upon Him who alone can bring growth. Now in this church like every other church we all have different tasks to perform.

But in carrying out those tasks we must always view ourselves as only servants of the living God and realise that our task would accomplish nothing unless God himself brought growth into our

church. The only one who is important in this church is the Lord Jesus. If you see yourself as important, as a key person in this church then you need to learn that you are a servant.

On the other hand if you think yourself to be useless and insignificant then remember you are a servant of the living God, an instrument that he uses for his purposes and for his glory.

The practical consequence of this truth is that we are all serving God with one purpose (v 8). Ultimately our purpose is to bring glory to God. We might all have different tasks just as planting and watering are different but both those tasks are serving one purpose, which is growth. This also teaches us that we need each other. Seed planted would come to nothing unless it is watered and seed cannot be watered unless it is planted.

Now we need to constantly remind ourselves that we need each other. We cannot function; as a church without one another, none of us is more important than others we each have a task to perform for our Lord. Therefore we must value one another, encourage one another and support one another and ultimately help one another to keep our eyes focused on the Lord who alone is important because He alone can bring growth.

When we have a true understanding of ourselves and of our fellow Christians and of the Lord then division will not be possible within God's church.

But even if our service for the Lord is not appreciated by our fellow Christians or even if we don't feel valued by them remember that the Lord appreciates and values our work and rewards us accordingly (v 8). Even if in this world we receive no reward although serving the Lord is a rewarding work then one day when we reach our heavenly home our work will not go unrewarded.

We don't do it for rewards for if we do; our work is not being done with the right attitude but the Lord never forgets our labour for him and will reward all accordingly (Revelation 11:18). The Lord's reward is not based on results or success but according to our labour. A missionary may spend 40 years labouring for the Lord and see only a handful of people saved while another missionary may see hundreds coming to the Lord in only a few years.

The reward of those missionaries is not dependant on their apparent success or failure but on the basis of their faithful labour for the Lord. I am so glad of that for it frees us from thinking of Christian work and ministry only in terms of results. We all long for growth, we long for the gospel to take root and grow in the hearts of those in this area.

But ultimately we will not be rewarded according to how many people were added to God's church here. No we will be rewarded on the basis of our faithful labour for our master.

At the end of the day we are all God's fellow workers (v 9), we work and trust God to work through us. He ultimately does His work we are his labourers. It was God's church at Corinth not Paul's or Apollos or anybody else's.

Likewise this church is not the Pastor's or Elders church or anybody else's church. It is God's church. He uses his instruments to plant and water the seed of his word but only God brings the growth. We must labour together in planting and watering as God enables us but ultimately we must rely and plead with God that he will bring growth in his church and in our lives.

Amen