

Our Christmas message will be next Sunday. We invite everyone to join us for the Christmas Eve 6:30p.m. showing of The Chosen Christmas Special. It consists of a number of carols old and new by contemporary artists, monologues on the names of God, and a new episode of The Chosen about the birth of Jesus. We will follow that with a carol and the lighting of candles.

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:1 Paul is about to give them some severe words of discipline. That doesn't mean they are not born-again. They understand and have received the meaning of the cross. They have gifts of the Spirit (Romans 8:9ⁱ). He just told them that they have the mind of Christ (2:16ⁱⁱ). Our passage today starts with that conjunction, "but." Despite those good things, they were still carnal, immature believers. That must have really shocked them, for as we see later in the letter, they seemed to think they were spiritual superstars. In the introduction he told them they were not lacking in any spiritual gift as they waited for the Lord's return (1:7ⁱⁱⁱ). Paul is giving them a dose of reality. **Spiritual gifts do not equate to spiritual maturity.** He will be telling them in a later chapter how they needed some boundaries on the use of those gifts and be more considerate of others when they express them (See chapter 14). Their lives needed to come in line with what they knew and believed (Colossians 2:6,7^{iv}).

Christians, even those who express gifts of the Spirit, can be people of the flesh. Other translations use the words carnal or worldly. A few verses later Paul will use the term, "merely human." They are still brothers and sisters in Christ, however they are still infants in Christ who are not living by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16^v). Their behavior reveals the truth about their maturity. They are still self-focused. They interpret the Word in a way that suits them. They are like the teenager who thinks he knows more than his parents. In the case of the Corinthians, the immaturity exhibited itself in their factious behavior. *The carnal man is characterized by division. Division is striking proof that a man or a people are carnal, whether the division be in a church or in a family.*^{vi} Verse 3 tells us it was also expressed in jealousy and strife. We will see other areas it was expressed as we go through the letter.

In Hebrews 5:12-14^{vii} the author explains that infants in Christ have not trained their powers of discernment by constant practice to discern good from evil. They are not yet familiar enough with the Scriptures to know whether it is from their own mind or the gentle voice of the Spirit. How do we know when a deeper teaching is valid or a distortion of the Word? How do we know when someone is really inspired and sees some deep truth or if they are being misled and leading others astray? We learn to distinguish the difference by training our powers of discernment on a constant basis. Is what I'm hearing just my mind or the Holy Spirit? Testing your power of discernment will teach you to distinguish between good and evil. It is to watch for the fruit of that teaching or idea (Matthew 7:20^{viii}). It is to be able to put it alongside the Scriptures and see how it lines up. Does it feed the untamed ego or glorify God? We test it and learn from it and our powers of discernment grow. Then, and only then, are we ready of meat.

I recall one man who was following my sermons online asking me why I didn't preach on the gifts of the Spirit more often. I explained that I preach through the Scriptures, so the frequency of a topic depends on its emphasis in Scripture. When a

sermon came up with the fruits of the Spirit, I explained that the fruits of the Spirit are more necessary than the gifts of the Spirit. That is an emphasis we will see in chapters 13 and 14. He quit following my sermons. He was not ready to digest the meat (John 16:12^{ix}). He wanted to hear what pleased him and exalted his own opinion of himself as a spiritual giant, when in fact he was a babe. He did not want to test his opinion with Scripture. This Corinthians had the same issue. They had the gifts of the Spirit but the fruits of the flesh. They had not yet learned of the upside-down ways of the kingdom, that the greatest is servant of all (Mark 9:35^x). Our emphasis should be the same as Scripture. We may enjoy one topic more than others, but if we do so to the neglect of the teaching of Scripture, we will be out of balance and disturb the unity in the body.

² *I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,* 1 Corinthians 3:2 This letter is written about five years after Paul planted the church there in Corinth. He spent a year and a half teaching them the fundamental truths of the gospel (Acts 18:11^{xi}). That whole time he had to keep teaching the basics of the gospel of grace and humility. Until they got those truths in their hearts, he could not teach the meatier truths (Hebrews 5:12^{xii}). If he did, they would misinterpret what he was teaching. That is because they would interpret the teaching in a carnal way (Ephesians 4:22-24^{xiii}). For example, if he taught that they are free in Christ to be led by the Spirit and not they law, they could think their own thoughts were the leading of the Spirit. Which is another issue he will have to address later in this letter.

I heard a story about a preacher who started at a church. Everyone liked his first message, but then he preached the same message the next week. They thought that was a little strange, but no one said anything. The third week he preached the same message, so the elders asked him what was going on. He told them that when the congregation started living the message, he would preach a new one. I am sure you are thankful that I don't follow his example! Yet, as we go through the Bible, it is interesting how those messages we need the most keep coming up.

One time a man slipped into the congregation who was sharing what sounded like deep profound mysteries to anyone who would listen. The only problem was that he had some very sinful patterns in his past that he did not reveal to the elders. He was attracting people with his unique teachings that appeared on the surface to be meaty truths from the Word. Meat is not secret knowledge or mysterious hidden treasures in Scripture. Beware of the person who constantly wants to bring up new teaching. The Word of God has been studied by spiritual people for 2000 years. The desire for the new and hidden is appealing to our ego as we come to believe that we have been more enlightened than others. It makes us feel superior. Spiritual hunger, on the other hand, is wanting to understand the depths of the basic truths of the Bible. That is the meat.

Meat can be insights into Scripture that we had not seen before, but more often it is a revelation of how we die to ourselves to allow the life of Christ to be manifested in our mortal bodies (2 Corinthians 4:11^{xiv}). Are you ready for that? Paul told them they were not ready. Until we take hold of and live the gospel basics, we are not ready. D. A. Carson wrote that: *Maturation will disclose itself in a growing ability to take in more and more Christian truth (3:2). It will also show itself in a large-hearted attitude that avoids quarreling and jealousy, and refuses to sink into narrow factionalism.*^{xv} The Corinth factionalism was expressing itself in an attitude of "our group is better than yours".

³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? 1 Corinthians 3:3,4 Paul used the words "people of flesh" in verse one meaning merely human. The word "flesh" here in verse three is slightly different. It means to be dominated by the flesh. Their lives were demonstrated little difference from those people who did not know Christ. What they thought was being spiritual was breaking the body into factions.

Jealousy and strife are not the least of the symptoms of fleshly living. Those sins are more destructive than many Christians seem to think. They are far from being petty sins, because, among other things, they cause division in the church, Christ's body, for whom He gave His life. They are among the surest marks of fallen humanness, just as unity is one of the surest marks of divine transformation.^{xvi} John MacArthur

Wisdom is spoken to the wise who have the mind of Christ, but those who are still worldly aren't ready to receive it. They need milk of the Word, the basic meaning of Scripture and basic Bible knowledge (the *peshat* -1Peter 2:2^{xvii}) which will renew their minds so that their actions follow (Romans 12:2^{xviii}). That is best for the babe in Christ. But if they stay a babe and don't show signs of trying to get up and walk in the Spirit, something is wrong with their development. **The signs of their fleshly state were jealousy, strife, factions, and glorying in men.** Their eyes were not on Jesus but were on their favorite teacher. It is a common problem. We may relate to one teacher more than another, but that doesn't mean that we should be a follower of that person.

Everything said by any teacher should be judged by the Word (Acts 17:11^{xix}). We should listen to different interpretations and pray and search the Scriptures to discern what is the correct interpretation. Every human is flawed and has weak points. To follow man instead of Jesus is to set yourself up for disappointment (Jeremiah 17:5^{xx}). The world follows men. The church should follow Jesus, who is the Word incarnated, the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22^{xxi}).

Paul will ask them to be imitators of his way of life, *as he follows Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1^{xxii}). The qualification of "as I follow Christ" is essential. If anything he does is not Christlike, don't follow that part, but do follow the examples leaders set that do lineup with the life of Jesus.

It is essential to understand that carnality is not an absolute state in which a believer exists (Rom. 8:4–14), but a behavior pattern he chooses one moment at a time. To say it another way, a Christian is not fleshly in the sense of being, but in the sense of behaving.^{xxiii} Jesus is our righteousness, but every moment we choose to walk in Him or in our old nature.

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 1 Corinthians 3:5 God gave the church prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers, who are just servants equipping the church (Ephesians 4:11^{xxiv}). Servants in this case is the Greek word that is the equivalent of a waiter. They serve the food, which in this case is the spiritual food. But it is God who *supplies* the spiritual food. He is responsible for our faith, salvation, and spiritual growth. All comes from Him. He can use any old bush (Exodus 3:2^{xxv}). Our eyes should be on Him and not on His instruments! Moses didn't take Israel to Mt. Horeb to worship the bush! All glory to God alone, the fire in the bush. At the same time, we are to hold them highly in love for their work, and follow good examples (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13^{xxvi}). We should do so recognizing it is

the grace of God in them that makes them who they are. If God should take His hand off that servant, you would no longer see the anointing that caused you to admire them. Ezra and Nehemiah frequently said such and such was accomplished "*for the good hand of our God was on us*" (Ezra 7:9^{xxvii}; 8:18^{xxviii}, 22^{xxix}, Nehemiah 2:18^{xxx}, Psalm 139:5^{xxxi}.) They gave God the glory for what was accomplished. Jesus told a parable about a slave owner whose servant plowed the field all day and then came in and prepared dinner for his master. The master does not thank his servant for doing what he should, for it was his duty. Woe to us if we do not do what is our duty (Luke 17:10^{xxxii}).

Moody told of an inebriated man who approached him and told him that he was Moody's disciple. Moody is reported to have responded, "You must be my disciple, because if you were the Lord's disciple you wouldn't be intoxicated." I have a friend who followed the pastor who led him to the Lord. His eyes were on that man. When that man backslid, my friend also fell away from following Jesus. We are to make disciples, but if they are our disciples and not the Lord's, we've failed in our mission. God's servants are merely His servants, and they have the freewill to continue to follow or stop following. Pastors should never be given the allegiance that belongs to God alone.

⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 1 Corinthians 3:6 Everyone has their task in the body of Christ. Some plant the seed of the Word. Others water it with good teaching and encouragement, but growth only comes from God. I often hear someone with a gift tell others they should do what they do. Our callings are unique (1 Corinthians 12:6^{xxxiii}). Just be sure you find your calling from God.

God brings the growth. Are you growing, or have you stagnated? Are you my disciple or the Lord's? Are you here because you like this style of preaching, or because the Lord called you here and is speaking to you through His Word and causing you to be more like Him?

⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 1 Corinthians 3:7 Preachers, teachers, evangelists, elders are all nothing without the Lord. Pharisees taught the Word of God, and often distorted it in the process. The Lord told people not to follow their example (Matthew 23:3^{xxxiv}). Without the hand of God on the one who ministers, without their personal relationship with Jesus, they are nothing. All the good they do is from God. Never trust man! Always trust God.

I'm often confronted with how fragile our human lives are. Death can easily knock on our door, here one moment and gone the next. A car crashes, a rock falls, an allergic reaction, and suddenly we are standing in His presence. Our life is truly a mist that is here but for a moment (James 4:14^{xxxv}). Oh that the gracious hand of God might remain on us for this moment, and that we might follow faithfully until we graduate to glory.

⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 1 Corinthians 3:8 The servants are a part of the body of Christ. It is our oneness in Christ that should eliminate all jealousy or selfish motivations. Together we serve for the honor of our King. Just as all the cells in the body work for the common good, so all believers in their various callings work together for the glory of God. We are all rewarded with eternal life in the presence of our Savior. However, each one will be rewarded by God to the extent of their obedient cooperation with the Spirit. Because God is completely just, every laborer receives just compensation. What that is we can hardly imagine, but we may have a hint of it in the elders casting down their crowns before Jesus in Revelation 4:10^{xxxvi}.

The fact that God rewards us according to what we do is mentioned many times in Scripture (2 John 8^{xxxvii}; Matthew 16:27^{xxxviii}; Romans 2:6^{xxxix}). Wages is the Greek word *misthos*. It is also translated as hire. It is literally pay for service rendered. It can be meant as a reward or punishment. The wicked will be rewarded with punishment. It is basically what you deserve for what you have done. I understand the word to be a product of the justice of God. God does not ask you to serve Him without rewarding you for that service. He deserves to be served, for all we are and all we have comes from Him. But His justice demands equity, whether blessing or punishment. That is why Jesus had to take our punishment. The justice of God could never just look the other way.

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:9 Elders are God's fellow workers. In other words, they are appointed by God to care for God's vineyard, or in another metaphor, faithfully shape the stones of the living temple (1 Corinthians 4:2^{xi}; 1 Peter 5:2^{xli}). That is a privilege but carries quite a responsibility (James 3:1^{xliii}).

There are many metaphors for the church in Scripture. A field was used by Jesus in some of His parables. Seed is planted in the field, and depending on the soil condition or the weeds it bears a certain amount of fruit (Matthew 13:8^{xliii}). Elders are tasked with cultivating that field and planting it with the Word of God. We encourage people to break up our hearts' hard ground so the seed of the Word can take root and produce fruit.

The Apostle Paul liked to use the metaphor of a building of living stones. Peter also used it (1 Peter 2:5^{xliv}). We must be shaped to fit together. When the temple was built there was to be no sound of a hammer at the construction site. The stones were quarried from under Jerusalem in what is today called Solomon's mines. I visited the great cavern, the biggest cave in Israel, right under the old city. They planned in advance the size of the stone and cut it to fit exactly. Some stones were as big as a bus. We are being shaped here to fit in God's heavenly temple made up of living stones (Hebrews 3:6^{xlv}; Ephesians 2:19-22^{xlvi}). The preaching and teaching of the elders, the difficult lessons of life, the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and conflict with our brothers and sisters in Christ are all God's chisel to take off our rough edges and smooth us to fit in the church here and in the heavenly temple.

Our passage today has challenged us to look at our lives and see if we are maturing or if we are stuck in the infant stage. Are we training our powers of discernment by applying the Word? Are we welcoming the conviction of the Holy Spirit? Are we dominated by the flesh or the Spirit (Romans 8:8^{xlvii}; Galatians 5:16^{xlviii})? Are we humbly serving others or seeking to have our way? And do we see our leaders as God's servants, and give glory to God alone for what is accomplished? Are our eyes on man or on God? You are God's field. How are the crops coming along? Is ground of your heart broken up to receive the Word? Is the Word taking root and producing fruit unto God?

You are God's building. As a living stone are you fitting together with your fellow stones that make up the building? Are you fitting in or isolating? These are the challenging thoughts that the Holy Spirit is putting before us through His servant, the Apostle Paul.

Questions

- 1 Why would the Corinthians be upset with Paul's claim that they were immature?
- 2 What characterizes the carnal man?

- 3 What does “flesh” mean in verse 3?
- 4 What is one of the surest marks of divine transformation?
- 5 What were the signs of the Corinthians fleshly state?
- 6 Is carnality a sense of being or behaving?
- 7 Where does growth come from?
- 8 Why does God promise to repay?
- 9 What are the two metaphors for the church?
- 10 What are the implications?

ⁱ **Romans 8:9** ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

ⁱⁱ **1 Corinthians 2:16** “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 Corinthians 1:7** ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,

^{iv} **Colossians 2:6-7 (ESV)** ⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

^v **Galatians 5:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

^{vi} Leadership Ministries Worldwide. (1996). [*The First & Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*](#) (p. 48). Chattanooga, TN: Leadership Ministries Worldwide.

^{vii} **Hebrews 5:12-14 (ESV)** ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

^{viii} **Matthew 7:20 (ESV)** ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

^{ix} **John 16:12 (ESV)** ¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

^x **Mark 9:35 (ESV)** ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

^{xi} **Acts 18:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

^{xii} **Hebrews 5:12 (ESV)** ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food,

^{xiii} **Ephesians 4:22-24 (ESV)** ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

^{xiv} **2 Corinthians 4:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

^{xv} Carson, D. A. (2004). [*The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians*](#) (p. 74). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

^{xvi} MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1984). [*1 Corinthians*](#) (p. 73). Chicago: Moody Press.

^{xvii} **1 Peter 2:2** ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—

^{xviii} **Romans 12:2 (ESV)** ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

^{xix} **Acts 17:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

^{xx} **Jeremiah 17:5 (ESV)** ⁵ Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.

^{xxi} **Ephesians 1:22 (ESV)** ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,

^{xxii} **1 Corinthians 11:1 (ESV)** ¹ Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

^{xxiii} MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1984). [*1 Corinthians*](#) (p. 72). Chicago: Moody Press.

^{xxiv} **Ephesians 4:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

^{xxv} **Exodus 3:2 (ESV)** ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

^{xxvi} **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (ESV)** ¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,
¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

^{xxvii} **Ezra 7:9 (ESV)** ⁹ For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.

^{xxviii} **Ezra 8:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18;

^{xxix} **Ezra 8:22 (ESV)** ²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him."

^{xxx} **Nehemiah 2:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

^{xxxi} **Psalms 139:5 (ESV)** ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

^{xxxii} **Luke 17:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

^{xxxiii} **1 Corinthians 12:6 (ESV)** ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

^{xxxiv} **Matthew 23:3 (ESV)** ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

^{xxxv} **James 4:14 (ESV)** ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

^{xxxvi} **Revelation 4:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

^{xxxvii} **2 John 1:8** ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

^{xxxviii} **Matthew 16:27 (ESV)** ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

^{xxxix} **Romans 2:6 (ESV)** ⁶ He will render to each one according to his works:

^{xl} **1 Corinthians 4:2 (ESV)** ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

^{xli} **1 Peter 5:2 (ESV)** ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

^{xlii} **James 3:1 (ESV)** ¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

^{xliii} **Matthew 13:8** ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

^{xliv} **1 Peter 2:5 (ESV)** ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

^{xlv} **Hebrews 3:6 (ESV)** ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

^{xlvi} **Ephesians 2:19-22 (ESV)** ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

^{xlvii} **Romans 8:8 (ESV)** ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

^{xlviii} **Galatians 5:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.