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Title: MAKE ROOM FOR GROWTH

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, ESV

3¹*“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for 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? ⁴For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human? ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”*

Continuing our series in 1 Corinthians, today we are looking at chapter 3. In chapter 2, Paul made a distinction between two kinds of people – the NATURAL man and the SPIRITUAL man: the person WITHOUT the Spirit and the person WITH the Spirit. One is LOST, the other is SAVED or FOUND. In chapter 3 Paul makes a further distinction between two groups of people. This is a distinction among those who HAVE ALREADY EXPERIENCED NEW LIFE IN CHRIST, BUT... They’re NOT in the same place spiritually. One group is MOVING ON TO MATURITY, growing in their faith and doing work that lasts for all eternity. The other is STALLED IN INFANCY. BOTH are believers, BUT... While one is THRIVING in their walk of faith, the other is FLOUNDERING and ineffective.

In the beginning of chapter 3, Paul addresses this group of flounders – which appears to make up most members of the church in Corinth. That disturbs me. If I were to name Pentecostal churches in the New Testament, the Corinthian church would be named among them. Paul is making rather clear that being in a Pentecostal church doesn’t necessarily make you mature. The Corinthian church, by Paul’s declaration, is both Pentecostal AND immature. I believe there is more instruction concerning the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians than in any other book of the Bible. That is at least, in part, because of the misuse of some of the spiritual gifts in Corinth. Read chapters 12, 13, and 14 if you don’t believe me. So, if chapter 3 is for anyone, it is for us Pentecostals. It’s a sad day for Pentecostals when the preacher points his finger at his Pentecostal church and calls them babies because they haven’t grown spiritually. My thought is that if any church should be a mature church, it should be the Pentecostal church – a church led by the Holy Spirit. Here Paul is addressing this third kind of person that he refers to as FLESHLY. They are believers who root in the pigpens of their old natures and resist the control of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is challenging for me. Here we have a church that has the gifts of the Spirit in operation, yet they resist the control of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I contend that some of the so-called manifestations of the Spirit demonstrated in Corinth were really manifestations OF THE FLESH because some were CARNAL. A carnal man isn’t led by the Spirit, so any such manifestation would not be of the Spirit. So, we Pentecostals MUST be discerning in that every so-called manifestation of the Spirit is NOT a manifestation of the Spirit. That’s why Paul says in chapter 13, though you have the tongues of men and angels and have NOT love – it’s just like tinkling brass – just NOISE – no value. That’s why having prophetic powers and the ability to understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have faith so as to move mountains but have not love – you are NOTHING. If you give all away and deliver your body to be burned, but have not love, you gain nothing. You see, the first named fruit of the Spirit is LOVE. If there is no love – love for God and love for mankind – any such manifestation is worthless. These carnal believers have acknowledged a measure of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, but they have failed to walk the path of sanctification. There is LITTLE, if any spiritual growth toward maturity in these CARNAL believers.

This in-between group of carnal, fleshly Christians characterized a SIGNIFICANT number of believers in the Corinthian church. Paul says... *“I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are*

STILL WORLDLY – MERE INFANTS in Christ.” Paul uses the word WORLDLY. As a young believer, my concept of worldly was mostly about appearance (length of dress, length of hair, the absence of certain behaviors, etc.). That’s not what Paul is talking about here. The word translated *worldly* is *sarkinos*, and it means, literally, *fleshly*. Or... as the King James says, *carnal*. In verse 4 the word is translated as – being a “mere man” or a “mere human being.” In other words, it’s the OPPOSITE of spiritual. It refers to a certain kind of attitude and behavior that prevents believers from moving onward and upward in the Christian life.

Paul tells the Corinthians that, since they are still like infants in their faith, he had to give them the spiritual equivalent of milk, for they were NOT ready for SOLID FOOD. This echoes, to some extent, what the writer of Hebrews said... *“Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature”* (Hebrews 5:12-14). The writer of Hebrews is talking to the same kind of believer that Paul is talking to, which tells us that this condition of STUNTED growth is NOT really ALL THAT RARE. Therefore, Christians must resist the tendency and the temptation to flounder. Stop PLAYING church and BE the church!

Paul speaks quite directly to the Corinthians, telling them: You’re NOT where you OUGHT to be, and... You’re not nearly as far along AS YOU THINK YOU ARE... AND... It’s YOUR OWN FAULT. You’re doing this to yourself, he says. He tells them that they are sabotaging their own spiritual growth. How are they doing this? *“For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings?”* (vs. 3-4). As we’ve mentioned weeks ago, there were several divisions in the Corinthian church, each associated to a different Christian leader – Paul and Apollos and Cephas (Peter) and even Christ – and each group tended to look down on the others, and it was creating all kinds of conflict. So, Paul is saying: You can’t move to the next level of spiritual growth UNTIL you leave this pettiness and bad behavior behind and begin to act like, for the lack of a better word, GROWN-UPS.

It is difficult to preach a sermon from this passage because, as far as I know, we don’t experience the same kind of disunity and division that was common in Corinth... and I can’t tell you how happy that makes me. Still, I can’t read a passage such as this one without thinking: HOW DO THESE VERSES APPLY TO ME? Are there areas in MY life in which I am being petty and petulant? Am I doing things or saying things that cause division? Am I holding myself back from the growth God intends for me? EVERY Christian would do well to ask themselves these questions. EVERY church needs to ask these questions. Are there areas in which we are small-minded? Are there areas in which we’re holding ourselves – or others – back?

Today as we look at these sinful attitudes that stood in the way of unity and growth among the church in Corinth, I want us to consider three things we can do to make sure that we are NOT behaving, as Paul would say, as “mere human beings.” These ideas will apply to your PERSONAL life, your WORK life, your FAMILY life, your SOCIAL life, and, of course, CHURCH life.

Here are the three things WE NEED TO DO to avoid this trap of holding ourselves back. FIRST of all, ...

1. Make an Effort to Move Away from Petty Conflicts. I’m thinking that the theological differences between Paul and Apollos and Peter probably didn’t amount to all that much. (If it did, we would see it in their writings.) Maybe there was a difference in approach, or style, or emphasis. Maybe even some minor differences in ideology, since none of these men were infallible. However, they were, for the most part, on the same page theologically. Yet their followers used these minor differences to create major quarrels among themselves ... to the point that they were unable to function as a LOVING Christian fellowship. We love 1 Corinthians chapter 13 – the LOVE chapter. Most would credit that chapter as one of the most beautiful in all of scripture. (Some have attributed it as the most beautiful portion of literature.) Yet it was written to a dysfunctional church that really wasn’t even demonstrating the love of Jesus as they ought. We need to be sure that we’re not guilty of the same thing. Part of being a spiritual grown-up is being able to accept the idea

that someone, at some time, might have an opinion different than my own ... and that's OK. I don't have to think I'M RIGHT about EVERYTHING – ALL THE TIME! Let me tell you about two families that couldn't be more different from one another. One family is prone to disagree with one another on life's most important topics: RELIGION, POLITICS and FOOTBALL. When they're together they're often engaged in spirited debate about these topics. Sometimes you'll hear someone say, "How could you think that? Are you out of your mind?" Sometimes you'll hear, "That's a good point, I never thought of that." There's a lot of laughter and a lot of love in the room. The other family is very different. They all attend the same kind of church and support the same political candidates and root for the same team. And... You dare not say anything that might challenge any notion that everyone in the group holds dear. You can talk politics IF you talk THEIR politics, BUT... If you say the wrong thing, they'll cut you off at a second's notice. Now, let me ask you, which of these two groups would you say best embodies a SPIRITUALLY MATURE culture of unity? Being of one mind does NOT mean that everyone has the same opinion about everything all the time. It does, however, mean that everyone has the SAME COMMITMENT to SEEKING THE TRUTH and LEARNING THE TRUTH while SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE. This is why John Wesley said, "May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may." In the book of Romans, Paul said... *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18). What a great attitude to have: I will not be the reason there is conflict among us. I will not be the reason there is disunity in our circle. If we're going to put an end to spiritual self-sabotage, let's move away from petty conflict. Find something BETTER to do with your time. BTW – Just about ANYTHING would be better. Here's the SECOND thing – and it may sound as if I'm shifting gears, but this is right on topic...

2. Place No Limit on the Lessons We Can Learn from Others. There were those in the Corinthian church who would say, "I am of Paul," and they appeared to hang on to his every word. And... There were those who said, "I follow Apollos," and they hung on to HIS every word. There were those who said, "I'm with Cephas," and they hung on to HIS every word. Theologically there probably wasn't a nickel's worth of difference between these three leaders, but... That didn't stop each group of followers from manufacturing a difference. When someone from Paul's group was teaching, do you think those in the other groups had any respect for what he said? Do you think they were willing to listen and ready to learn when someone from the other side got up to speak? Probably not. I can't recall ever being in a church where there's been division among the membership over various speakers, but I AM aware of churches where there has been division over various WORSHIP LEADERS and differing STYLES of music. I hate the oxymoron "WORSHIP WARS" as much as I hate the oxymoron "CARNAL CHRISTIANS." Those words just don't go together. I've heard people on both sides of the worship debate say, "I just can't worship with THAT kind of music." My response (my carnal response) could be: "I'll be right back. Let me run to the microwave and heat up your bottle." I agree that some things that are called music might not qualify as REAL music, BUT... I don't think God is so concerned about tempo, pitch, rhythm, or style of music as He is about the heart of the musician or worshipper. Scripture goes so far as to say – *"Make a JOYFUL NOISE unto the Lord."* I confess I'm not partial to noise. Some people would do me a favor to limit their singing to the shower and NOT my shower. But KNOW you or they ARE NOT singing to me. I wonder what would happen if WE LOVED JESUS SO MUCH that we jumped at or looked forward to every opportunity to worship the God WHO IS WORTHY whether the style was to our liking or not. Be mindful that REAL worship is to an audience of ONE – God Himself. It's not for OUR good pleasure. Just so you know, I study the writing of some scholars who ARE NOT particularly Pentecostal. There might be some I tend to stay away from because of their anti-Pentecost viewpoint, BUT... Many a person with a different viewpoint than my own has spoken into my life. We need to get past the idea that those with a different perspective have nothing to offer us in the way of leadership. We need to get past the idea that those who ARE NOT part of our clique are somehow the enemy. Have you noticed that after a football game, the players themselves talk and hug and some of them gather at the 50-yard line to pray? They see themselves as colleagues and co-laborers. If there's a fight, it is usually among the fans... the very people who made NO ACTUAL CONTRIBUTION to the outcome of the game. The players themselves are friends. The fans (sometimes) act like enemies. The attitude of us-and-them

hardly ever comes from an emotionally superior or spiritually superior place. It usually comes from a place of immaturity. This attitude has no place among those who desire to grow into the fullness of their faith. If we want to put an end to spiritual self-sabotage, then let's not exclude others unnecessarily. Let's be willing to AT LEAST LISTEN, and... Let's be willing to learn. This brings us to the THIRD idea I want you to consider.

3. Remember YOUR place in This Process. Paul talks about his work and the work of Apollos. He says that ONE PLANTED THE SEED and... The OTHER WATERED it. They EACH did THEIR PART ... AND... It was GOD WHO CAUSED THE GROWTH. At times Paul was known to have said, *"Imitate me as I imitate Christ,"* but he did not consider himself to be anyone's guru. Neither did Peter or Apollos. They EACH had their work to do in the kingdom AS DO WE! They EACH had their role to play AS DO WE, and... They trusted God to bring everything together AS SHOULD WE. The results were for HIS GLORY, NOT their own. And so, Paul says... *For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.* YOU are God's FIELD! In other words, you are GOD's PROJECT. In week one of this series, I talked about how we are a WORK IN PROGRESS. I quoted Paul's words to the church in Philippi... *"...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). Your spiritual growth isn't dependent upon Paul or Apollos or Peter or Pastor Jim or Pastor Norm or any pastor who makes this church their home. Your level of worship isn't determined by any style, or any song, or any singer. GOD is the one who causes the growth. He and HE ALONE gives the increase. When we take our eyes off Him and look toward ANYTHING ELSE – a preacher, teacher, politician, singer, author, denomination, and on and on – when we give any human person or any human endeavor God's rightful place in our lives, we sabotage our spiritual growth, and we remain stalled in our infancy. Let's remember that our role in this process is to YIELD OURSELVES TO GOD – to be HIS field, HIS project – so that He can nurture in us a nature that is more like His Son, Jesus Christ. This means that HE WILL send Paul your way, and Apollos and Cephas and James and John and Barnabas and even Timothy. We welcome each one, because He uses them ALL to do His work in our lives. His work. For His glory and for your good.

CONCLUSION. Paul aims this passage of Scripture at those who were still being fed milk because they weren't yet ready for solid food. They're not yet ready because basically THEY DIDN'T WANT TO BE READY. They would rather have bickered among themselves than experience the fullness of God's blessings in their lives and in their church. They would rather have been a part of their little cult of personality than participate in the power of God. Paul said to them, "You are still infants today, AND... IT'S YOUR OWN CHOICE!" The message to us, then, is clear. EVERY time we practice pettiness, EVERY time we create a MAJOR conflict over a MINOR matter, we sabotage our opportunity for spiritual growth. EVERY time we put on airs of elitism, EVERY time we act condescendingly toward those who aren't part of our clique, we sabotage our opportunity for spiritual growth. ANY TIME we build a spiritual foundation on anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, we sabotage our opportunity for spiritual growth. Today I'm saying – Let's DO AWAY with this self-sabotage. Instead, let's fully embrace God's work in our lives. Each of us can say: I am God's project, His work in progress. I welcome every individual God sends my way to help me be more like Him.