

The power of an undivided heart

1 Corinthians 3:1-15

Pastor Tim Melton

Paul was writing this letter to help the church in Corinth. Remember that this church had problems of divisions, false teachers, drunkenness and sexual immorality, but still Paul spoke to them as saints and true believers in Christ. He thought back to how the testimony of Christ had been confirmed in them when He had seen their transformed lives. He knew that in Christ they had everything that they needed to live holy lives. But they had lost their focus, their allegiance, their first love, and because of that their hearts had begun to resemble their old way of living before they came to Christ.

Have you ever past through a season like this? Where you have become spiritually distracted or disillusioned and have veered away from holiness and God's call on your life? You knew you were playing the prodigal, but as you stayed away from God's Word, God's people and God's resources, you found yourself becoming more calloused and more susceptible to the attacks of the evil one and the temptations of the world. This was the situation of those in the Corinthian church.

In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul reminded them that only the Spirit of God can comprehend the thoughts of God. He addressed those in Corinth as those who had received the Spirit of God. He wanted to bring them back to the fact that they, who were in Christ, had the Spirit and thus the capability to understand the spiritual truths given them by God.

In contrast, the natural man, the person still dead in their sin, did not and could not understand the things of God, because they are only spiritually discerned. The natural man are those who are focused on the seen material things of this world instead of the unseen realities of God. They are mastered by lusts, instinct and cravings rather than the Spirit of God. They are slaves to sin. Here, in 1 Corinthians 2,

the Greek word used for natural is actually defined as “animal” in contrast to spiritual. It is the picture of a person who, like an animal, is consumed by impulse, natural cravings and selfish ambitions.

Paul was warning them. Many of them had drifted away from God and needed to repent and draw back nearer to their heavenly Father. In the midst of their sin Paul still proclaimed boldly that, like him, they had the mind of Christ.

Paul then writes these words in 1 Corinthians 3:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh.

Even though they were entrapped in sin, Paul did not refer to them as fallen ones, rebellious ones or even spiritual failures. Paul calls them brothers. Paul still saw them through the gospel lens of redemption and knew them to be co-heirs of Christ and children of the same heavenly Father.

But because of their struggles with sin and worldly perspectives, Paul could not talk to them as the Spirit-filled people that they really were. Instead Paul had to talk with them as people of the flesh, babes in Christ who seemed to have no understanding of the new life into which they had been born. When their faith had been new, Paul had fed them spiritual milk because they desperately need the essentials of the faith. It was now three years later and because of their lack of holiness and understanding, Paul was still having to teach them the same basics of Christianity that they should have mastered years earlier.

For example, imagine someone has been a follower of Christ and part of the church for 10 years, but they are still trying to justify the immodest clothing that they wear, the access of alcohol that they drink, the pornography that they watch or the destructive moments of rage that they have on a regular basis. This would be similar to the situation Paul is addressing. If a person is a follower of Christ, by the grace of God, they should be growing in their faith. They should be moving more and more into holiness and a greater understanding of the gospel. It should be more than just what is right and wrong, but a greater surrender to Christ and a greater understanding of the riches found in God’s Word. They should not be asking, “how close can I get to sin without actually sinning?” They should be longing to know how they could more fully serve their Savior and Lord who gave His all for them.

Paul then continued by pointing out a specific example of the immaturity that he was talking about:

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? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

Paul points out a very clear indicator of their spiritual condition in these verses. There was jealousy and strife. This was proof that they were not walking in the Spirit, but instead were being dominated by their fleshly desires. They were not looking to Christ, but instead were looking out for their own agendas and prestige. They were coveting what others had and were thinking more highly of themselves because they were associating with certain human leaders. It was pure selfishness.

In these verses we see a very clear spiritual principle. If we are not in right relation with our fellowman, we are not in right relation with God. As we walk in the Spirit and draw near to God He will grow in us a love for others. Even if they will not be reconciled with us, those who are right with Christ will have done everything possible to be rightly related to others. Their immaturity was evident to Paul because of the brokenness of their relationships one to another.

In these verses we see that those in the church in Corinth had turned their allegiance from Christ and were more concerned in being related to a respected teacher. We, too, can be guilty of this. I see this at times evident in Christian conversations. I talk to some who quote the well-known pastor, best-selling author, or a popular Christian blog, but rarely refer to the scriptures or Christ. I then talk with another who humbly quotes scripture and views the world and life situations through the lens of the gospel. Jesus is on the forefront of his mind, even in the most difficult of situations. That is the challenge and the temptation that Paul is addressing in these verses. Are our minds focused on Christ?

Paul and Apollos had been erroneously elevated to Savior status and Paul is reminding them of the truth. Yes, Paul planted the seed of the gospel. Yes, Apollos followed this with his spiritual watering of the seed that Paul had planted, but do not be mistaken. God alone gives the growth. It is similar to farmers. We might think that they grow crops, but in reality they merely create a setting so that the seeds may grow. God is the one who created the process known as photosynthesis, where sunlight comes together with chlorophyll and carbon dioxide. We should be thankful to farmers for what they do, but may we never be mistaken. God is the one who makes the growth of fruit and vegetables possible.

It is the same in the spiritual realm. You could call it spiritual photosynthesis. Yes, we must pray, care for others with the love of Christ and clearly share the gospel, but it is God through Christ who grants faith to believe. It is God who draws us to Himself, reveals the truth of Christ, and gives us His Spirit.

The church in Corinth had turned their focus from Christ and it was resulting in many problems for them. Psalm 37:4 says, ***"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."*** When the Corinthians ceased to delight in Christ their desires were dominated by their flesh. That will always be the case, that is why we see throughout scripture that we must fix our eyes on Jesus. He is our only hope to walk in holiness.

In Hebrews 12:1-2 we read, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith."***

In 2 Corinthians 2:2, Paul proclaims, ***“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”***

In Matthew 14:28-30, Jesus approaches His disciples at night, walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee, and Peter said, ***“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”***²⁹ He said, ***“Come.”*** So, ***Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.***³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ***“Lord, save me.”***

As long as Peter’s eyes were focused on Jesus he walked towards Christ, but once Peter was distracted and took his eyes off of Christ he began to sink.

Paul clearly was strengthened by this simple truth of fixing your eyes on Jesus. In Philippians 3:8-10, Paul writes, ***“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”***

Paul was seeking to drive them back towards Christ.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Paul is stating once again what he has done in their midst. He had preached the gospel of Jesus Christ and through faith they had been saved. He now exhorted them to be careful how they would build upon this foundation of Christ in their church and in their individual lives as well.

Christ will return, and on that day each one’s work will be revealed by fire. There is an eternal reward that waits for some, but for others the reward will be forfeited. Many will build on faith in different ways, and in the end Christ will judge what sort of work has been done.

If one has built on the foundation of Christ by faith with God’s Word, God’s methods and God’s means, then the work will survive. If one has built on the foundation of Christ with godless methods and by the means of man, then the work will be burnt up even though the believer will be saved.

One man prays fervently, loves God and loves His neighbor, trusts in the work of the Holy Spirit and regularly shares the gospel; the fruit of his labor will remain. Another serves the kingdom of God humbly and anonymously out of his love for Christ. The fruit of his work will remain. Another studies God’s

Word, prays from a pure heart, trusts God for holiness, and seeks God's glory above all things. When she faces judgment her works will remain.

On the other hand, imagine a ministry that was built on the abilities or methods of man. It will be burned up. A ministry that was centered on making the pastor famous will be burned up. Ministry based on a false gospel will be burned up. Evangelism based on works and not on faith will be burnt up. Personal religious works based on personal glory and not God's glory will be burnt up. Ministry using religion for selfish gain will be burnt up. A daily devotional life that was based on using God to get what you want; any supposed fruit will be burnt up.

Paul is just exhorting them to remember the foundation of Christ that has been laid in their lives. They must realize that if they continue in the way of sin that although they may be saved, the reward of their supposed works will all be lost. On the other hand, if they will return to the faith in which they know, God will work in and through their lives in a way that will make an eternal difference.

Just as they were saved by grace through faith, as they continue in grace and faith they will be matured and made holy. Through Christ the reward in heaven will be theirs.

May we each hear Paul's words today. May we fix our eyes on Jesus. By God's grace may we relate in a holy manner with others. May we build on the foundation of Christ as we seek to grow in spiritual maturity. May we live for eternity in a manner that results in spiritual fruit and our reward.

Discussion Questions:

1. What from this lesson did you find most interesting or puzzling?
2. Have you ever had times when you were not as mature in the faith as you had hoped? Explain.
3. How would you explain the following truth in your own words? "If we are not in right relation with our fellowman we are not in right relation with God."
4. What type of things in your life make it more difficult to stay focused on Christ?
5. How can one nurture Christ in their heart and minister in a way that will be rewarded in eternity?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this discussion?