

6. Understanding What Prevents Spiritual Growth

In our last topic, we saw that there are three kinds of spiritual understanding. Those who are not Christians have no spiritual understanding because they are spiritually dead. Those who are carnal Christians lack spiritual understanding because they are spiritually very immature. Those who have spiritual understanding receive that understanding from the Holy Spirit because they are yielding their human spirit to the Holy Spirit. In our topic today, we will learn some key lessons about the reason that Christians can remain as carnal Christians and not develop spiritual understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, we read, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able.” Chapter two concludes by saying that the spiritual person can examine all things and will have the mind of Christ to understand those things. However, Paul then went on to say in these verses that he could not speak to the Corinthians as spiritual people because they were still carnal. The word that is translated “carnal” means *a person that is governed by their human nature and not by the Spirit of God*.

Paul says that Christians who are governed by their human nature and not by the Spirit of God are spiritual babes. The word that is translated “babes” means *a young child that is not able to speak clearly*. This same word is used in three other passages to describe this level of spiritual maturity – 1 Corinthians 13:11, Ephesians 4:14 and Hebrews 5:11-14. When we take those three passages plus the first three verses in this chapter we are given ten characteristics of the spiritual babe (toddler) that is not able to speak clearly. Those ten characteristics are:

1. He acts like one who is not a Christian - 1 Corinthians 3:1
2. He is not able to understand difficult teachings from the Word of God – 1 Corinthians 3:2
3. He experiences envying, strife and divisions - 1 Corinthians 3:3
4. His talk, understanding and thinking of spiritual things is limited - 1 Corinthians 13:11
5. He is tossed to and fro by every false teaching - Ephesians 4:14
6. He is easily deceived by false teachers - Ephesians 4:14
7. He is dull of hearing to spiritual truth - Hebrews 5:11
8. He needs to be retaught the basics of Christianity - Hebrews 5:12
9. He is unskillful in the word of righteousness - Hebrews 5:13
10. His senses are not developed to recognize good and evil - Hebrews 5:14

As you can see from the ten characteristics listed above, the spiritual toddler gives very little evidence of spiritual life. That is why the spiritual toddler needs spiritual milk instead of spiritual food. Spiritual milk is exactly what is needed for the person who is a new Christian. 1 Peter 2:2 says, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.” However, the problem comes when new Christians do not grow and continue to need spiritual milk long beyond the time that they are new Christians. That was what had happened to the Christians in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 3:3-4, we see how the Corinthians were acting because they had not grown and become spiritual children, spiritual young men or spiritual parents. Those verses say, “For you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I *am* of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” The word that is translated “envy” means *a severe form of selfishness*. The word that is translated “strife” means *contention or arguing*. Here, we see that when Christians do not experience healthy, spiritual growth they remain spiritually immature and continue to act like mere men. The word that is translated “divisions” means that they were *splitting into different groups and fighting against each other*. Here, we see that severe selfishness will always lead to arguments and will eventually cause divisions that divide a church. Many of the people in the church in Corinth claimed to follow a particular teacher instead of following the Lord.

Paul rebukes that choosing of favorite teachers by asking the question in 1 Corinthians 3:5 where we read, “Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?” The word that is translated “ministers” means *those servants who carry out the commands of another*. This means that it is important to understand who has the authority to give those commands. In Matthew 28:18, Christ said, “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.’” Here, we see that Christ has been given all authority both in heaven and on earth. As a result, Paul said that he and Apollos were servants who were carrying out the commands of Christ when they shared the Gospel with the people of Corinth. The Lord had used Paul’s obedience to Him to lead the Corinthians to place their faith in Christ. The Lord had used the obedience of Apollos to help them in their growth.

In 1 Corinthians 3:6-8, Paul went on to write, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.” Paul made it very clear that he and Apollos were not in competition with each other. In fact, they were just carrying out the ministry that the Lord had committed to each of them to do. Paul had come first and had shared the Word of God with the Corinthians. Later, Apollos came and helped them to grow. Acts 18:27-28 says of Apollos, “And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.” Here, we see that the Lord had used the ministry of Apollos in a powerful way to help the Corinthians grow.

Paul said that the key was the fact that the Lord was the One that gave Paul and Apollos their ministries. He said twice that God was the One who was giving the increase. He said that there should not be a focus on either the one who planted or the one who watered. Instead, the focus should be on the Lord who was giving the increase. We need that same reminder today.

Because of our modern communication such as radio and television, many people have become followers of a particular teacher instead of following the Lord. Paul said that we need to get our focus off the men and back where it should be on the Lord. This is a key lesson that we need to teach our children.

Paul said that both the one that plants and the one that waters are one. Here, we see that an effective ministry is a team ministry where each person is carrying out the ministry that the Lord designed and equipped them to do. However, the Lord is the head from whom they receive their ministries. Ephesians 4:15-16 says, “But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” Christ is the Head and each part of the body is to carry out the ministry that the Lord has designed each of us to do. We are also reminded that each person will be rewarded according to what he or she has done. This will be explained much more fully in our next topic.

We go on to see our relationship as workers for the Lord. 1 Corinthians 3:9-10 says, “For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.” We see that as we serve the Lord we are all fellow workers. In any field, the different workers are assigned different responsibilities by the person that is in charge. In the same way, we are to realize that we are just fellow workers doing what Christ has equipped each of us to do. The key thing is that we are obedient to Him.

We want to help our children to realize that the Lord has given each of them a different ministry. We want to help them realize that they are working together to carry out the work of the Lord. We see that the Lord uses two different pictures to help us understand our work as we serve Him. First, we are all working in God's field. Second, we are all working to build God's building. We are also told how God builds His building.

Paul said that God had given him the privilege of helping to lay the foundation of God's building, which is the church. Here, we see that the Lord equips some people to start churches in places where there are no churches. Paul said in Romans 15:20, “And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation.” Once Paul had churches established in an area, he moved to another area to repeat the same process. Paul said that God had given Apollos the privilege of building on that foundation. Paul said that each of them had been given their responsibility according to God's grace.

This is an important thing to help our children understand. Nothing that we do is for our own glory. Instead, everything that we do is to be for the glory of God. For that reason, we want to help our physical and spiritual children realize that they need to pay careful attention to the way that we build God's building. We will all be accountable to the Lord for the way that we build. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your physical and spiritual children learn to work as a team in building the Lord's building.