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Paul's Attitude Toward the Corinthian Church. (2013)

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Paul's Attitude toward the Corinthian Church.

Topics.

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- Carnal and infant Christians behaving in a human way.
- Infant Christians contrasted to spiritual Christians.
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- Jesus famous Sermon on the Mount.
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During the New Testament era Jews and Gentiles were being saved and added to the church. Have you ever wondered how Paul viewed the Corinthian church? What was in his mind? It had no religious denominations, no institutions and very few church examples to follow. The Corinthians had to cope with a new Gospel message, four-thousand years of Jewish ceremonial rites, holy days and a multitude of religious customs and traditions that Jews had practiced throughout their generations.

Added to these enormous difficulties the Corinthian church had to unite Jews who considered Gentiles an unclean race without God and Gentiles who most likely worshipped pagan gods and who knew nothing about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob together so that they would grow together into one new creation in Christ, also called a new creation in Christ, a new man in Christ and the body of Christ. The city of Corinth was at the heart of a primary trade route in the ancient world, it had a reputation for sexual immorality, religious diversity, and corruption. The church Paul had planted there floundered under all these influences and began to divide over various issues.

NOTE: though Paul's letter is directed to the Corinthian church the content applies to every church and every believer in the same situations.

God's Grace that was Given You in Christ Jesus.

1 Cor. 1:2-4 ----- ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I thank God always for you because of God's grace that was given you in Christ Jesus.

Paul's greeting begins with the words to those who are called to be saints (i.e., brothers and sisters in Christ), he writes the letter to the Corinthian church but realises that among their midst there may be those that are not going to respond to his message so he addresses it to everyone who will respond to the call of Christ.

NOTE: called to be brothers and sisters in Christ does not mean that God has predestined some to be saved and others not to be. Those who are called to be saved refer to those who from their own free will respond to the Gospel. Whoever hears the salvation message of Christ is at that moment being called by God, but whether they respond to the call is left entirely up to their free will and will depend on the condition of their heart. It is interesting to notice that even though the following verses show that Paul considered the Corinthian Christians as worldly and carnal in their walk and viewed them as infants who had not grown up he still speaks to them as brothers and sisters in Christ and thanks God for them (v4).

Why does Paul thank God for such worldly brothers and sisters in Christ you might wonder, simply this because of God's grace that was lavishly granted to them because of their faith in Christ (v4), but though they maybe saved they are in danger of suffering loss when Christ returns in glory (1 Cor. 3:11-14).

Carnal and Infant Christians Behaving in a Human Way.

1 Cor. 3: 3-4 ----- ¹I, (Paul) 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?

The problems in the Corinthian church were pride, vanity, jealousy, strife and egotistic and conceited people. Christians were exalting each other and self-centred living to satisfy the flesh. Being of the flesh is behaving in the human way as opposed to God's way. They were self-absorbed and acting from pride, rather than being humble and giving, even though they did not lack in any spiritual gift, they were infants in Christ, acting in a human way and abusing the gifts they had.

Infant Christians contrasted to Spiritual Christians the Corinthian Christians were referred to as infants because they were more concerned about gratifying their own desires and their own social standing and their importance amongst others. They spoke with pride and arrogance and were jealous of some and exalted others. In contrast to this Paul Apollos and Cephas were called spiritual because they were more concerned about others than themselves and certainly placed no importance on their social standing or how people perceived them since the exaltation of Christ was the only praise they lived for and not the exaltation of man. Added to this they spoke from a spirit of love, compassion mercy and grace in contrast to the Corinthians who spoke from a spirit of pride and arrogance.

The Corinthian Church Gets Even Worse.

1 Cor. 5:1-2 ----- ¹It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you (the Corinthians) and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans (Gentiles) for a man has his father's wife. ²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

The Corinthian church is a mess: Paul is constantly trying to bring it to some degree of godliness and right behaviour, but the interesting thing to notice is that as messed up as this church is, Paul still sees it in his mind as a church and those in the assembly as his brothers and sisters in Christ.

1 Cor. 5:3-4 ----- ³though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

It seems Paul in his mind sees the church as a group of people assembled together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The assembly may be a godly group of people living from the Spirit and in the fruits of the Spirit (i.e., love compassion, grace, mercy and forgiveness etc.), like Apollos and Cephas or it could be a group acting in human ways and living from the flesh like the Corinthians. Either way Paul sees them both as churches and speaks to those who belong to them as his brothers and sisters in Christ even though one is a good testimony to the name of Christ and is encouraged and spoken well of while another is a bad testimony to the Lords name and needs correction and discipline. Paul does not question their salvation, but speaks to each one according to their spiritual growth or lack of it.

Prior to this chapter Paul said to the Corinthians: -

- What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod (meaning in a spirit of discipline) or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:21).

How Paul responded to a church and what messages he spoke to them depended upon their spiritual growth concerning their behaviour and attitudes toward each other. The behaviour of the Corinthians gets even worse: -

1 Cor. 11:17-20 ----- ¹⁷But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat.

To fully understand this it needs to be mentioned that the Lord's Supper in the early church was not a wafer biscuit and a thimble sized glass of wine, but a proper meal. It was a meal shared with brothers and sisters in Christ in Jesus name. Neither was the Lord's Supper limited to Sundays only or being in a church building or being controlled by a priest robed in religious garb, whenever brothers and sisters came together (mostly in their homes) to have a meal in Jesus name that meal was the Lord's Supper.

The Church is People not Bricks and Mortar Buildings.

We live in an age where many tend to think of the church as being in a bricks and mortar building and its members only coming together on Sundays, but this mindset has developed from years of tradition not the Bible. This is because the church is people not bricks and mortar buildings so wherever two or more people are gathered in Christ's name that is where the church is for that moment, it could be on any day of the week and could be in a cathedral, a church building, a home, at a picnic by the river side, in a park or even at a coffee bar.

This is because it is not the day or the location that is the church, but the people at the location who are the church regardless of the day and regardless of what the location is or wherever it maybe. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for the way they were taking the Lord's Supper, he tells them when they come together as a church it was totally wrong and that it is not the Lord's Supper that they are eating for the following reasons.

- In eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. one goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not (1 Cor. 11:21-22).

This shows the extreme pride and arrogance that existed amongst the Corinthian brothers and sisters. Each one was eating their own meal and indulging themselves with their own drink while others remained hungry and went without. The people with plenty were humiliating those who had little or nothing. The picture is a group of people eating a meal in the Lord's name, but not sharing it with those that are poor and have nothing.

Paul goes on to say: -

- Paul says, let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup (1 Cor. 11:28).

Let, a person examine themselves in this context is not about examining ourselves to see if we have sinned over the last few days, but about examining ourselves to see if we are being selfish or giving are we eating to ourselves or sharing what we have with the less fortunate. Some of these less fortunate people are so poor they are starving remember during the era of the early church there was no government support from the Roman government for the poor. This is why some are weak and even dying because the wealthy and rich in the Corinthian church are not sharing their food and drink with their brothers and sisters in Christ who had nothing.

The poor in Roman days were very poor, many of them were probably beggars, the religious leaders, the noble, the wealthy, the rich and well to do in the Corinthian church were full of pride and exalting each other so they probably considered the poor of a too lower class to be part of the body of Christ and clearly considered

them to common to mix with. Now here is the amazing thing Paul at the end of this letter prays that the grace of the Lord Jesus be with the Corinthians and ends this first letter by saying, my love be with you all in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 16:23-24). Even though Paul rebukes them he does not dismiss them, rather he sees himself as their father and them as his children because in his first letter he brought many in the Corinthian church to repentance and salvation.

In Paul's mind he sees the Corinthian assembly as a church and as such his ministry is to bring its congregation to maturity, which in this context means living from the Spirit (i.e., humbleness, love, compassion, kindness, grace, mercy, forgiveness etc.) as opposed to living from the flesh (2 Cor. 7:7-10) (selfishness, pride, ego jealousy, greed and such like things).

It is interesting to note even though the Corinthian church is full of human and infant behaviours (Carnal in KJV) the only person Paul told the Corinthians to put out of the assembly was the man sleeping with his mother, he did not say, put out the others who were acting in a human or carnal way living from the flesh because he understood that not every Christian brother or sister has learned to walk in the Spirit. Is it any wonder that Paul being fully aware of all the flaws and faults amongst the Corinthian church always thanked God for the grace that He lavished upon them because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (v4).

The Corinthians over time did respond to Paul's instruction because in Paul's second letter we find Paul boasting to Titus about the Corinthian church and says he has perfect confidence in them.

- Whatever boasts I (Paul) made to him (Titus) about you (Corinthians) I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶I (Paul) rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you (2 Cor. 7:14-16).

The Corinthian church had problems with their affections for the world, their fleshly passions, the desire to be important, but they still had faith in Christ, it was because of their lack of growth in spiritual maturity that Paul could only speak to them as children, but even with all their shortcomings Paul loved them and was prepared to suffer for them. He acted as a father would to his children tolerating their fleshly behaviour, but constantly trying to correct it.

Paul saw the Corinthians as infant Christians: if a person is confessing Christ and gathering together with other brothers and sisters in the Lord, it appears that Paul did not judge if they were saved or not saved, he did not judge a person's salvation, rather it seems he accepted them as part of the church, but he disciplines them concerning their outward behaviour and teaches them toward righteousness to correct their ungodly behaviour and to bring them to spiritual maturity (2 Tim. 3:16).

NOTE: many think spiritual maturity is having great knowledge and the gifts of the Spirit, but this is not so. Paul said that the Corinthians: -

- Were in every way enriched in Christ in all speech and all knowledge when the testimony about Christ was confirmed amongst them and that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift as they waited for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:5-7).

Spiritual maturity before God is about walking in the Spirit it is living a lifestyle that flows from the fruits of the Spirit (i.e., love, compassion, kindness, mercy, grace, forgiveness and such like things. Spiritual maturity is about following the royal law (Matt. 22:37-39) (Mark 12:28-31) (James 2:8) love your neighbour as yourself' it is about being humble and treating others with respect and decency and doing good not harm. These things are far more important to the heart of God than miraculous gifts.

- Micah wrote: "What the LORD requires of mankind is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God" (Micah 6:5-10).
- Isaiah says: "The LORD loves justice, hates robbery and wrong doing" (Isaiah 61:8).

- Jeremiah said: “Those who know God practise steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, because it is in these things that God delights” (Jer. 9:24).

The great prophets Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah clearly show us that the people the LORD loves are not only those who acknowledge God, but who also uphold justice, do not lie, deceive or make promises they do not intend to keep, but speak the truth, do what is right, show respect and give help to others when able and make choices that lead to peace. These are the things the LORD delights in and that bring His favour.

Jesus Famous Sermon on the Mount: the constant theme throughout Jesus famous Sermon on the Mount is doing what is right before God by seeking the way of peace in all situations. Jesus calls Christians to treat people fairly and with respect, dignity, decency grace compassion, kindness, mercy and to be quick to forgive. This means living a life that honours God and the Lord Jesus Christ is about doing all we can do to protect people from harm and being dominated by the thought, “What action can I take or do that will help and encourage this person.” It is all about doing right to others.

This is the reason the message Jesus spoke on the mountain is referred to as, “The Famous Sermon” because the principals if followed not only by Christians but all humanity are the only way to peace (Matt 5). A wicked person is primarily one who deliberately and consciously denies the existence of God and does harm to other humans.

For further information on Jesus Famous Sermon see: -

- Matthew 5 in Commentary New Testament (ON WEBSITE MENU).

What we can learn from the Corinthian church today: throughout history certain churches have strived for the perfect church or what some call the pure church, but there has never been a pure church or perfect church since it began. This kind of mentality creates anxiety especially when the so called unacceptable enter the doors of the church. Those who believe the church should be pure and perfect instead of making these people feel welcomed and accepted, stay well clear of them since they consider them unworthy and unacceptable and fear they will taint their church. Religious leaders of churches that have a perfect church mentality are afraid if someone enters their assembly they will spoil its appearance of being the perfect and pure church.

Often those who may be seeking salvation but do not fit the criteria of the church leaders are not made to feel welcome and in some churches not even allowed in the doors. This is absolutely contrary to the way Paul would run his church, rather than drive a person away he would take the opportunity to witness the Lord Jesus Christ or if they are already Christians bring them to spiritual maturity. If some Christians saw a Corinthian church today they would not even consider it to be a church, we need to understand that some Christians can be living from the flesh or acting in a human way, but that does not always mean they are not saved.

We can rightly judge a person's outward behaviour and try in love to help them overcome it, but we cannot judge a person's salvation because we cannot know their heart nor can we know the inner hurts and struggles they maybe battling with. Paul did not judge the Corinthians salvation, but he constantly tried to correct their behaviour.

Work out your own salvation: the following three verses show that Paul leaves the question of salvation to the individual themselves, our responsibility is to witness Jesus and encourage and support a believer in their faith but salvation is their responsibility, only they can make that choice and even after accepting Christ it is still their choice to remain in the faith. God never violates a person's free-will even when they are in His family.

Paul wrote: -

- Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

- Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor. 13:5).
- Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

It should be highlighted here that faithful Christians do not endeavour to bring holiness to completion to earn their salvation, but because they are already saved and have a deep desire in their hearts to honour God and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They understand that righteousness that leads to eternal life is a free gift of God that comes through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and God's grace and cannot be earned by self-effort.

In the book of Romans Paul shines a spotlight on the following truth: -

- Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:10).

The spirit of the law is to protect the innocent from physical, financial, sexual, emotional, verbal and spiritual harm, thus those who know God aim to keep the law because it is the right and loving thing to do. It fulfils the Ten Commandments regarding man, and the royal law: -

- Love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12:31) (Jas. 2:8).

Bringing holiness to completion is about endeavouring to live a lifestyle that honours God and brings a good testimony to the name of Jesus and the Christian faith. Though the law is splendid as a guide to understanding God's will; as a means of reunion with God, the God we have sinned against it is a hopeless failure nevertheless both the law and grace go together, the law without the Gospel is diagnosis without remedy, but the Gospel without the law is only the Good News of salvation for people who don't believe they need it because they have never heard the bad news of judgment, the law is not the Gospel, but the Gospel is not lawless (Rom. 3:19-20) (Eph. 2:13-22).

Judge, those Inside the Church and let God Judge those Outside.

1 Cor. 5:9-13 ----- ⁹I wrote to you (the Corinthians) in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people' ¹⁰not meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹but now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging (calling in question) outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (Call in question) ¹³God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

The group Paul has in focus in these verses are those who intellectually confess to believe in Christ, but have no sense of conviction of wrongdoing before God. They live their life continually to please themselves and have no thought toward offending God or for the bad testimony they bring to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is not talking about brothers and sisters in Christ who have a conviction of wrongdoing in their hearts and have a deep desire to honour God, but are overcome by some temptation or weakness because of what Paul calls human limitations. The, people Paul has in focus in these verses is those who practise religion on the outside and at religious functions, but are indifferent to how they live their everyday lives before God.

NOTICE: Paul clearly tells the church not to judge those outside the church that is God's job. It is not the churches job to impose or force its will, its morals, and its ethics onto those outside the church. That would be like going into a strangers home and telling them how to raise their children or worse still going into an enemies house and telling them that the way they are raising their children is wrong.

All this is going to do to these parents is make them even more hostile toward us. The only message we have for the world is the Good News of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and the only people we should be imposing God's standards on are those in our own family of whom Christ is the head.

End