

## **Don't Stunt Your Growth**

### **1 Corinthians 3**

Amy and I are at the stage of life where our kids are growing up really fast. I'm still hanging on to the lead when it comes to being the tallest in the family, but Amy's getting passed up real fast. Just a couple years ago she was the second tallest, but now she's getting close to being the second shortest. When we visit friends or family that haven't seen us in a while, they often comment on how much our kids have grown and changed.

Childhood and adolescence are times of rapid physical growth and development and it's important during those years that kids and teenagers get good nutrition and a balanced diet so it doesn't stunt their growth. In developing countries where good nutrition is hard to come by there are all kinds of growth and developmental problems. Here in America, it's easier to get food, but it's also easier to get foods that aren't very good for you. I remember hearing when I was growing up: *"Don't drink coffee or it will stunt your growth."* And while I'm not sure that's true, I do know that a steady diet of junk food can really be a problem. It can hinder healthy growth and lead to being overweight and that's not good either.

According to Ph.D. Barbara Lyle with the Kerry Health and Nutrition Institute, *"Infants are born with innate preferences for sweet or savory flavors, and for that reason many children prefer high-calorie snacks or candy instead of high nutrient dense foods."* So if we let kids have their way, they'll probably snack on junk food all the time and end up stunting their growth. We've definitely had to keep an eye on that in our home and try to teach our kids why benefits of good nutrition. Not enough of the good stuff can stunt your growth, but too much of the good tasting stuff can be a problem as well.

The same things are true when it comes to our spiritual lives. In order to grow spiritually, we need a healthy diet of balanced biblical truth and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. If we get that, we will continue to grow spiritually – that's the way God designed it to work. But if we don't have a healthy and balanced diet, or we end up consuming a bunch of spiritual junk food instead, it can end up stunting our growth. Not enough of the good stuff can be a problem and too much of the good tasting stuff can be a problem as well.

That's one of the things Paul could see happening in the church at Corinth. Since he had left, other teachers had risen up within the church and were taking them in the wrong direction. The people were focusing on the wrong things and it was leading to arguing and division. And today we will see how it was affecting their spiritual growth. We will see some things we need to watch out for that are very prevalent among Christians today and stunting their growth.

Paul just got done teaching them about the huge difference between God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world and the difference between the natural person and spiritual person. The natural person lives according to the wisdom of the world and cannot understand the wisdom of God. But the spiritual person can understand God's wisdom and ought to be growing in it and living according to it more and more. The people he was writing to were spiritual people and should have been living according to God's wisdom, but they were living according to worldly wisdom instead, and that's what Paul points out in the beginning of chapter 3.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

*But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, <sup>3</sup>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? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?*

Paul rebukes them for how they were behaving. They had become loyal to certain preachers and Bible teachers and must have been focusing on certain distinctions and variations in their preaching that was leading to division among them. They were focusing on minor differences rather than on the core truths they all agreed on. And based on what we will see later in chapter 3, there must have been some local teachers and pastors within the church that were leading the way.

They were acting like worldly people – people of the flesh, instead of those who were spiritual. They were acting like spiritual babies and Paul was upset because by that time, they should have been more mature. One of the things we've learned over the past couple of years is that there are different stages of spiritual maturity. The Bible mentions spiritual infants, spiritual children, young adults and parents. Every Christian should grow through these stages over time as they seek to become more and more like Christ. But that wasn't happening in Corinth.

Paul was expecting that they should have been at least in the spiritual child or young adult stage. They should have been well beyond the point of arguing and dividing over variations in preachers. But they weren't. They were still spiritual infants. He still had to feed them milk instead of solid food and deal with their self-centered, childish behavior. He's upset because their spiritual growth had been stunted. They weren't where they should have been and that's why they were acting in such sinful ways. In the next few verses he points out why it was so foolish to focus so much of their attention on different preachers.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.

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

The reason they should not have been giving so much attention to preachers is that they were only messengers – they were servants of God whom he assigned to carry out the task of teaching his truth. Paul likens them to gardeners – he planted and Apollos watered, but neither of them caused any growth. They had the same general purpose in God's field – which was the church – and would receive the same wages from God. They weren't anything compared to God. It was only God that brought about spiritual growth, not the preachers, so to pay so much attention to them and divide over distinctions in their teaching was foolish. It was stunting their growth. They were focusing way too much on distinctions and not enough on what mattered most – things like core gospel truths, love and unity in the church, and reaching their community with the gospel.

This is a problem that plagues churches today as well. We can come to really enjoy certain preachers whose teaching connects really well with us and we can focus on what makes them different than others. Sometimes they have a particular theological point of view that becomes very appealing to us because of our loyalty to them and we begin to highlight those distinctions against other preachers and other streams of theology. We focus on secondary issues and differences and we lose sight of all that Christ is for us and wants for us. And we end up arguing and dividing, just like the Corinthians. We do exactly what they're doing and I think Paul would ask us: "What are you doing?" These preachers you

admire so much are just servants of God carrying out his assignment. Don't put so much focus and attention on them and what makes them different than others." Such behavior leads to spiritual malnourishment and stunted growth.

This can lead to other problems as well and Paul gets into that in the next section. Here he uses the analogy of a building.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-17.

*<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

In these verses I think Paul is primarily addressing secondary teachers in the local church – not him or Apollos, but local teachers and pastors within their own church. Paul says he was like a master builder who laid the foundation of a building when he was with them. He was the first one to teach them the core truths of the gospel. Apollos and Peter had a similar role in churches. But then there were the pastors and teachers who were a lasting part of the local church who were building upon that foundation by what they taught among the people – people like me, Kent, Randy and other teachers in the church. I think it was these who were causing problems in Corinth.

Teachers and pastors are building upon the foundation of the gospel of Christ crucified and Paul likens the work they are doing to materials that were either solid and sound, or weak and fluff. Some of it was like gold, silver, and precious stones and was valuable for true, lasting spiritual growth, but some of it was like wood, hay and straw that was worthless spiritual junk food. The good stuff and the bad stuff.

When Christ returns, he will reveal the quality of each teacher's work – some of it will prove to be good, solid, and valuable – with lasting spiritual benefits. But some of it will prove to be watered down fluff that hasn't done any good. Teachers whose work proves to be good quality will be rewarded, but those whose work is a bunch of fluff will watch it all burn away. So Paul warns the teachers among them to be careful about what they teach. They were turning more and more toward worldly wisdom and human philosophy that went beyond what Scripture actually says and it was a bunch of garbage. God cares very much about his church and if any of the teachers destroys the church, God will destroy him.

As I look at this passage, I also see a warning to us who are part of the church, to be careful of what kind of teaching we are absorbing. Do we focus on teaching that aligns with Jesus and what he taught his disciples? Or are we focused on teaching that focuses on peripheral issues? There's a lot of teaching out there that focuses on issues that are linked to Christianity, but are not core biblical truths of the gospel – a lot of teaching that goes beyond what the Bible actually says and enters into the arena of human reasoning and wisdom. Issues of baptism, the Holy Spirit, end times prophecy, healing and miracles, wealth and prosperity, and many, many more. Often times there are preachers who only focus on these things in their teaching. And while these things may deserve some attention, they should never become our primary focus.

These are the things that bring arguments and division among Christians and these are the things that have very little if any lasting spiritual value. They're going to burn up in the end, and if we're focusing all our attention on them, we're going to find out that our growth will be stunted. We might know a lot about all kinds of minute theological distinctions, but we'll be spiritually immature. This can be hard to see in our church culture because biblical knowledge is valued more than anything else, but we have to understand that biblical knowledge does not equal spiritual maturity. It's part of it, but there are other important parts as well that we will totally miss if all we do is try to learn more theology.

So we need to be careful. Are we primarily feeding on teaching that actually helps us become more like Christ, or are we feeding on spiritual junk food that will prove to be worthless in the end? That was the problem in Corinth, and Paul wanted to expose and eradicate it. So he finishes this chapter with another warning.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23.

*<sup>18</sup> Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." <sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

Here he returns to their propensity to think and behave according to worldly wisdom and urges them to repent. "If you think you're wise in this world, become a fool, because that's the only way you can become wise in a godly way." He reminds them again to quit boasting in men – in the preachers they were focusing all their attention on, and boast in the Lord instead who had given them the preachers, as well as all things, for their benefit.

For us at East Lincoln I want us to ask ourselves: Has my spiritual growth been stunted? How can you tell? Well, are you all caught up in teachings that are causing division between you and other Christians? Are you focusing all your attention on secondary theological issues? Are you more impressed with certain preachers than with the Lord? Are you reading other books from your favorite author more than the Bible? Are you full of theological knowledge but lacking in love and a Christ-like lifestyle?

Hopefully after all these weeks in hearing about this problem in Corinth you are starting to see some of the dangers and problems that are so prevalent in American churches today and the way we treat preachers and theology. If Paul was here today and could see the condition of the church I think he'd be very upset. Let's not let these things happen at East Lincoln and if they are, let's humble ourselves before the Lord and repent. Let's get back to the Christianity of Jesus and the Bible and not the popular Christianity of today.