

## **“MOVING BEYOND SPIRITUAL ADOLESCENCE”** **(2 Corinthians 12:11-21)**

Over the years I’ve heard more than one person say, “I wish the church today was more like the early church in the Bible that was so vibrant, full of life, and on the move – where believers were unified in their mission and took their faith seriously.” When I was in seminary, I had a few classmates who dreamed of having a New Testament church – a church that looked like the church in the book of Acts that met daily in homes to sing and pray and study and fellowship, and shared freely with each other whatever was needed.

I can imagine the Apostle Paul saying, “How would you like to pastor the church at Corinth? Here’s what you get... a group of immature believers who divide over petty issues, who haven’t quite gotten over the vices of their immoral lifestyle prior to be saved, who have attacked me and betrayed me as their spiritual father, and have given their allegiance to false teachers who want to destroy the church. I have a job opening if you’d like it.”

We tend to romanticize the early church, but the reality is that every church in the New Testament had problems – just as every church today has problems – and no church had bigger problems than the church in Corinth. Paul started the church five years earlier and poured his heart and soul into this fledgling group of believers. He was their spiritual father in the faith, and in 2 Corinthians 11 he likened his role to that of a father preparing to give his daughter away in marriage. The Corinthian believers were the bride of Christ awaiting His coming for them, where they would be joined to Christ and celebrate their union with a marriage feast. Paul sees himself as the father of the bride – he introduced the Corinthians to Christ and led them to faith in Christ – and as their spiritual father, he’s committed to protecting their spiritual loyalty and purity to Christ as they await His coming.

Paul’s concern is that they’re not ready for the Lord’s coming, nor are they ready for Paul’s coming. He’s about to come visit the church in Corinth, and before he comes, he applies some tough love in verses 11-21 of chapter 12. He’s their spiritual father, and he doesn’t want to see his spiritual children stuck in spiritual adolescence. He challenges them to wake up, make some necessary changes, and get their spiritual house in order before he comes.

The two main concerns Paul addresses are their lack of loyalty to him and the gospel, and their lack of spiritual progress. What links both of these concerns together is spiritual immaturity. God didn’t save us to stay the way we are – just as we grow physically from being an infant to an adolescent to an adult – God’s goal for every Christian is that we grow and mature every day to look more and more like Christ – so that we will be confident and unashamed at His coming. Just as the Corinthian believers had a lot of growing up to do, there is much we can learn from this passage about our own spiritual development.

Paul first deals with their lack of loyalty to him and the gospel he taught them, and exposes five signs of immaturity. The first is **passivity**. In verses 11-13 he says... “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing. I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”

After Paul started the church in Corinth, he spent 18 months with them getting them grounded in the faith before he left to evangelize another region. While he was away, he's chagrined to hear that false teachers had infiltrated the church and were leading people away from the truth. To get people on their side, they bad-mouthed Paul and accused him of several things that were not true, and convinced many in the church that Paul could not be trusted and was not worthy of their honor and respect.

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul has been defending himself because he knows if they lose faith in him, they could lose faith in the gospel – and in defending himself, Paul uses a fair amount of sarcasm to get their attention. He says, “I've been playing the part of a fool – it's not who I really am – but your lack of loyalty has driven me to talk about myself and my qualifications as an apostle – something I hate to do I, but by acting like a fool I want to show you how foolish the false teachers are and how foolish you are for following them.”

He says, “Instead of defending myself, I should have been defended by you. When these false teachers came along and taught you another Jesus and another gospel, you should have said, ‘That's not what Paul taught us – that is error,’ and you should have removed them from your fellowship. When they started slinging accusations at me, you should have said, ‘We know Paul – that's not him – we lived with him for 18 months and he was nothing but honest and trustworthy.’” But nobody defended Paul – no one stood up for the gospel he preached – and their passivity threatened to undo the work of the gospel in Corinth.

The second sign of immaturity was **attraction to the sensational**. Paul's opponents arrogantly claimed not just to be apostles, but “super” apostles, while Paul was inferior. In chapter 11 Paul argued that he was not only equal to the apostles in his background and qualifications, but he was superior to them in that he suffered for the gospel, something they were unwilling to do.

The Corinthians, however, were more impressed with power than suffering. “When these teachers came to town,” they said, “they wowed us their speaking skills, their stage performance, and their supernatural displays of miracles.” We know from the book of 1 Corinthians that the Corinthian believers were enamored by the sensational. When Paul taught them about spiritual gifts, they zoned in on the miraculous gifts of healing, tongues, and miracles. “Those are the gifts we want.” Paul said, “Be careful – gifts are not given by the Spirit to show off and impress others, but to build others up in the Lord. If God gives you one of these extraordinary gifts, use them with humility, and if you don't have one of these gifts, don't covet those who do. Anything done supernaturally is done through the power of God, not the power of the person.”

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he too performed signs, wonders, and miracles – not to draw attention and praise to himself, but to authenticate that the gospel message he preached was from God. There's not a significant difference in these three words – signs are miracles used to get people's attention and point them to something beyond themselves – wonders are supernatural events that inspire awe – and miracles are mighty displays of power that transcends what is normally seen in the course of nature. All of these were gifts given to the apostles to authenticate that they were messengers of God.

But it appears as if the false teachers also performed signs, wonders, and miracles – how can that be? In Matthew 24:24 Jesus warned that “**false christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles...**” Just because someone performs signs and wonders does not mean they come from God. There are several examples in the Bible of non-believers who were capable of performing counterfeit signs by Satan's power.

One example is Pharaoh's magicians. When Moses performed a miracle, they were able to duplicate his miracle. When he threw a stick down and it turned into a snake – they threw a stick down and it turned into a snake. When Moses turned the Nile River into blood – they did the same thing. This counterfeit power will also characterize the antichrist in the future. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 says, “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders.”

This should give us pause when we hear someone claim to be a miracle worker or some ministry claim to be a place where miracles take place – because it's a perfect opportunity for Satan to deceive. When Jesus first began His ministry John 2:23b-24 says, “Many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.” Jesus knew what was in their hearts. He knew that they were drawn to the miracles and signs and wonders and professed belief in His name, but it wasn't saving faith. It was an emotional faith – it was a shallow faith – but once Jesus stopped doing miracles, these followers fell away.

Paul's rebukes his spiritual children for being drawn to powerful, triumphant leaders – and not humble leaders like himself that were willing to suffer. Like little kids, they were enticed by the sensational and deceived into following error.

A third sign of immaturity was **jealousy**. Verse 13 indicates that they felt inferior to the other churches, particularly to the churches to the north in Macedonia. He says... “How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” Paul didn't have favorite children – he loved everyone equally. The only difference is that he didn't accept financial support from churches where he was currently ministering – he supported himself by working as a tentmaker so that no one would think he was only in it for money. But he did accept financial gifts from already established churches that wanted to partner with him in the gospel ministry.

The Corinthians, however, were conditioned by their Greek culture to give money to teachers they esteemed, and felt insulted that Paul would not let them support him. Paul says sarcastically, “Forgive me this wrong! I'm sorry that I ministered to you sacrificially and didn't burden you with taking care of my needs. I love you guys, but you mustn't get the idea that you're inferior to other churches.”

A fourth sign of immaturity was **ingratitude**. He says in verses 14-15... “Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?”

Paul had made two trips to Corinth – first when he came to the city five years earlier and started the church, and the second was a brief visit he made after hearing about the intrusion of false teachers. That visit did not go well, and Paul wrote them a painful letter that led the church to repent, but problems still persisted. He says, “I'm coming back, and I'm coming not to hammer you, but to help you. I'm coming as a parent who has given everything for their children and wants to see them do well.”

He lets them know that he's not going to take money from them like the false teachers. As their spiritual parent, he doesn't want their money – he wants them – he wants their love, he wants a relationship, unlike the intruders who used them for their own selfish purposes.

Notice what Paul says in verse 15... “I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” What a statement... he’s not only willing to pay his own way so as not to burden them, but to also give of his time and energy to care for their souls.

He says in Colossians 1:28-29... “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” He says, “I want to be like the athlete who leaves it all on the field – who gives every ounce of his body, mind, and will to win and at the end of the contest collapses on the field exhausted and spent.” He viewed ministry as something we are to work at with everything we’ve got, so that when Jesus returns, we will have left nothing on the field. There’s no greater endeavor on earth than to give yourself to helping others know Christ and be like Christ. Ministry is costly – whenever you work with people, there’s a price to pay financially, physically, and emotionally. But Paul is willing, and even glad, to expend his time and energy into caring for souls.

All this would be easy if the people you ministered to were receptive, grateful, and showed you love in return, but Paul sadly asks in verse 15b, “If I love you more, will you love me less?” Paul is amazed that the more love he pours out on them, the less love they show in return.

One of the most important virtues in life is gratitude – both for what God has done for you, and for what others have done for you – and gratitude begins with parents. When you’re young and immature you don’t understand all your parents do for you – all the sacrifices and sleepless nights – all the hours spent praying for you and pulling their hair out at some of the choices you make – you don’t have a real sense of appreciation for them until your older and you have kids of your own – and you wonder how your parents ever survived what you put them through.

It’s also important to show honor and gratitude to your spiritual parents – to older believers who’ve invested in your life and put sweat equity into building the church. An attitude of gratitude is a major sign of spiritual maturity.

A fifth sign of immaturity we see in this passage is **gullibility**. The word gullible comes from the old English word “gullet” which meant to swallow or guzzle. It describes a person who easily swallows something without taking time to discern what they were taking into their body. The Corinthians, because of their immaturity, gulped down what the false teachers were feeding them without discernment. They fell for the lie that Paul was a slippery con-artist who used the collection for the poor in Jerusalem – that we talked about in chapters 8-9 – he used the collection as a ruse to keep the money for himself.

Paul addresses this lie in verse 16... “Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!” Once again Paul uses sarcasm... “I really tricked you this time, didn’t I? After not taking a dime from you, I’ve concocted a plan to rob you blind through this offering... what a tricky guy I am!”

You’ll remember in chapter 8 that Paul sent Titus and another brother from Macedonia to come collect the offering, and Paul reminds them that everything was done above board. Verses 17-18... “Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?” Paul’s point is that if Titus – who they were very fond of – if he handled the offering with integrity, and Paul was the one who sent him, why should they not trust him? Why were they so gullible to believe something so absurd?

Mark Twain said a lie can travel halfway around the world before truth has put its shoes on. Proverbs 14:5 says, “The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.” Mature believers do not swallow everything they hear, but wait to hear the facts and to hear both sides of the story. It’s hard to believe that after all Paul had done for the Corinthians that they so quickly turned on him and believed the worst about him. It’s a reminder to give people the benefit of the doubt and not jump to conclusions without facts.

In verses 18-21 Paul turns his attention to his second main concern – not only did the Corinthians lack loyalty to Paul, they lacked spiritual progress. After responding to the gospel five years earlier, some were still stuck in spiritual adolescence. There is an expectation, according to the Bible, that believers will show tangible signs of progress in their spiritual walk – not that they be without sin, but that they will sin less and less. But Paul fears that there are still unresolved relational and moral problems that still exist among the congregation.

Before he addresses some specific sins that haven’t been dealt with, he assures them that everything he’s about to say is for the purpose of building them up in the faith – he’s not looking to pound on them as much as to remind them of their call to be holy. In verse 19 he says... “Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.” He says, “I haven’t been saying all I’ve said to defend myself personally and lash out at you because my feelings are hurt – everything I’ve said is to strengthen your faith.”

Then he says in verse 20... “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.” Jesus said, “This is how everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that you can speak in tongues, you can have incredible gifts of speaking, you can know your Bible backwards and forwards, but if you don’t have love for one another, it means nothing. The Corinthian church got a failing grade when it came to showing love.

Paul mentions eight sins that are present in immature Christians...

- Discord is a lack of agreement or harmony, where my opinion and my perspective is more important than yours.
- Jealousy was a key problem in Corinth. Instead of being content with the gift God had given them, they coveted what God had given others.
- Fits of rage. When children do not get their way, they throw a tantrum. Spiritual adults are not quick to anger, but seek to resolve tension in a peaceful way.
- Selfish ambition is trying to get your way at the expense of others... “I want what I want and I don’t care what I have to do or who I have to hurt to get it.” That’s the sign of a spiritual toddler.
- Slander is making false statements about someone to damage their character and reputation. Slander is toxic because the person talked about is not present to defend themselves or correct misinformation.
- Closely related to slander is gossip, and he’s not talking about innocent banter, but malicious gossip meant to ruin someone.
- The Greek word for arrogance means to have a “puffed up” or “inflated” view of yourself, combined with looking on others with disdain.
- Disorder. God is a God of order and stability, while Satan is the master of disorder and chaos.

All these are signs of spiritual regress, and Paul's afraid that this is what he will find.

He also fears that he will find some still stuck in a pattern of sexual sins. Verse 21... "I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged." Corinth was a very loose city morally, and the Corinthian believers had come straight out of a pagan lifestyle. There had been a change, at least for a while, but some had slipped back into the old lifestyle of sexual sin.

As our culture has loosened its standards on sexuality, it's amazing how many Christians have gone along the normalization of sexual sin. It's not uncommon for people to say, "I love Jesus," to come to church, and yet disobey God's commands for sexuality. It's also not uncommon for professing believers to have the same problem with pornography as unbelievers.

Have you noticed that the Bible has a lot to say about sex? That's because God made us sexual beings and sex is a wonderful gift of God that is designed to be used in the right context – that is between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage. But because of sin, God's design for sex is corrupted and twisted and abused. Paul describes three ways this happens.

The first is through impurity. This refers not to the act of sexual sin, but to the thoughts and words and attitudes about sex that takes what God has made holy and pure and brings it down to where it is no longer special. Ephesians 5:4 says there should not even be a "hint" of sexual immorality. This would include things like dirty jokes or casually using four-letters words that make sex something dirty and nasty rather than holy. More often than not, people who think and talk about sex in impure ways often go on to participate in sexual sin.

The next way God's design is corrupted is through sexual sin. The word Paul uses is *pornea* – the same word from which we get "pornography." *Pornea* is a very broad, general word used throughout the New Testament to describe every kind sexual activity or gratification that takes place outside of the marriage covenant. This includes sex before marriage, adultery, homosexual activity, and pornography. Any sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage is sin.

Then Paul lists the sin of debauchery – a word you don't hear every day. Debauchery is an open and excessive indulgence in sexual sin – it's when all restraints are cast off and anything goes – and there's no sense of guilt or shame.

Why would a born-again Christian, saved by God's grace, continue to live just like the world? Paul says, "I hope I don't find you living this way when I come. I pray you will repent, put your worldly ways behind you, and live like the person God made you to be in Christ."

Every parent expects that their child will grow up to be fully functioning adults, and when a forty-year-old is still acting like a two-year old, something's wrong. Our heavenly father loves His children just the way they are, but He expects them grow and mature into spiritual adults. He's not looking for perfection, but He does want progress. One day very soon the Lord is going to pay us a visit – He's going to come for His bride. Will you be ready? May He find us confident and unashamed, ready to be completely transformed into the image of Christ.

