

SPIRITUAL 'ADULTING'

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 3:1-23
Fourth Message
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1 Corinthians 3:1-23

Good morning, PBC. I'm Rolana, the Women's Pastor, and I am so thankful to be here with you today to unpack 1 Corinthians 3 together.

Do you remember moments when you were a child or a preteen, and you just wanted to grow up? It felt like being a grown-up came with more freedom and less need to listen to others. You got to do whatever you wanted! You could choose your own pizza toppings; you could have pizza for breakfast.

As an adult who has had the privilege of having pizza for breakfast once or twice, I agree that being an adult is pretty great. I love the freedom I get to make my own choices.

But what you don't realize as a kid is that the process of becoming a grown-up is hard. Those of you who are teenagers and in your 20s are experiencing that. This 'adulting' thing is challenging. There is a lot to learn, things we don't want to learn but need to: taxes, what to do when you get a flat tire, how to handle a boss you disagree with, how to repair a friendship, how not to spend all of your money on pizza. Sometimes it can be really painful because we're confronted with our own limitations and failures. But you learn, grow, have fun, and enjoy the freedoms and the satisfaction that come with learning to be a grown-up.

In this passage today, the Apostle Paul dives into how to be a spiritual grown-up. Some of us might have that same longing we did as a child—we want to be more spiritually mature and not struggle so much with "spiritual adulting". We don't want to have such a hard time with prayer, being consistent with reading scripture, loving those we have a hard time with or evangelism. Just like with real adulting, we never fully arrive at perfect maturity. However, Paul will give us a helpful perspective on spiritual maturity and what that might look like in a certain context.

To understand this passage, we need to go back to the context of the letter. For those who have missed any

of the last three teachings, let me give you the essential details that we need today. 1 Corinthians was written to the church in Corinth, and there were back-and-forth letters from Apostle Paul to the church and another letter from a subset of people to Paul. We don't have the contents of those letters, but we know that Paul is addressing some of the issues that were brought up.

One of the biggest issues he begins to address is strife and quarreling in the church. It was so bad that there were reports about it—it was not a minor disagreement between two people. Paul has deep concerns about this.

However, another important reminder is that in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul starts with his own heart. He begins with gratitude for this church that is in conflict and affirms their faith. This is important because today, we see him be more direct about their weaknesses, but we need to remember the care Paul took before this passage.

To set the stage, we need to go back a few verses to see what Paul says about being spiritual.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
¹⁵ **The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.** ¹⁶ **"For who has understood the mind of the LORD so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.**

So here we see that being spiritual includes being discerning on spiritual matters. Spiritually discerning means assessing, weighing, and judging if something is true or seeing what is true beneath the presenting facts.

Another way of putting that might be to have spiritual eyes to see. It's to see past the way of the world, or the natural way of things, to what God is doing or calling us to in the midst of this world.

Discernment is a sign of spiritual maturity. I know that we don't see any sign of maturity or immaturity in this section yet, but it's coming.

Examples used in this letter and from Jesus include:

- Where the natural way is to build ourselves up and work for honor and esteem, God says it's better to be a servant.
- Where the natural way is to earn status and respect through eloquence and your appearance, God says his favor cannot be earned.
- Where the natural way is to hate or reject our enemies, God tells us to love our enemies.
- Where the natural way is to store up our possessions, God tells us to be generous.

It's an upside-down kingdom. Spiritual discernment is the ability to see those differences and determine how the Lord asks you to respond in real-life situations.

When we weigh and assess things, we want to do so accurately; otherwise, it's not helpful and, at times, damaging. The New Testament doesn't give us one clear outline of what healthy discernment looks like, but I do think it gives us three helpful pieces to consider.

Spiritual discernment is healthiest when we:

1. Understand God's Word

This means spending time learning from what God says in Scripture. Jesus says he is the truth. What does God tell us about himself and the world? When we spend time in his scripture, it shapes truth around our creator. Without it, we are defining our own truth.

2. Rely on the Holy Spirit

The Spirit gives us the mind of Christ and helps us understand. Through the Holy Spirit, we have the spiritual eyes to see. If we cut out the Holy Spirit, we are again leaning on our own understanding and not engaging our relationship with God. We are formulaically applying the text to our lives without God's present guidance.

3. Value the Body of Christ

This is what Paul will address more today and in chapters to come.

These three relationships are foundational for how to grow in healthy discernment.

Let's dive into today's passage to see what Paul might offer the Corinthians in the way of help and correction.

1 Corinthians 3:1:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

Immediately, he's saying that those spiritual people he just described? They're not these Corinthians. He's saying they are acting like babies! Let's read that again.

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. 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. 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?

Wow, that was blunt. But he is calling out jealousy and strife as the markers of being spiritually immature. In fact, from his perspective, these attitudes and actions cannot coexist with spiritual maturity. They are limiting. He says that he cannot even call them spiritual.

He's not questioning their salvation or love for the Lord—remember that Paul affirmed this at the beginning.

But this is a big deal. Jealousy and strife are both so human and yet so *spiritually* childish. We can see that this is not just a little jealousy, mild strife in their heart. This is the church picking teams, pointing fingers, and dividing. They aren't being intentionally sinful, they are merely acting like a normal human would. But they are missing spiritual discernment. And, they are not acting their spiritual age.

In the natural world, when you disagree with someone, your instinct is to distance yourself from them, be angry, and blame others. But in God's kingdom, we are called to serve and love even our enemies.

It's so easy to recognize in others when they are clearly acting out of the flesh, but when it's you, and you're in the moment or situation, doesn't it feel so, so right? So easy to justify?

In the case of the Corinthians, it's more complicated because it seems they are arguing and divided on matters related to the church and spirituality. The issue is that they don't recognize their division and attitudes as a problem. They might even think that because it's about godly things, their conflict and fighting are justified and needed. They can't see the larger damage being done.

We will all react with the flesh at different times, but do we have the spiritual maturity to discern it and the humility to allow others to give feedback and do something with it?

Division, quarreling, and jealousy are signs of immaturity. In 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul calls them to unity.

Here, we see that unity is a sign of spiritual maturity.

You might be asking what unity means. What is Paul trying to call them to? What should the Corinthians do with the convictions that drove them to this disunity? These are great questions we should ponder and explore as we dive more into this chapter and the ones to follow.

Before we dive into the next chunk of scripture, I want to tell you about my grandparents. My Opa and Oma were perfect. I mean, technically, they were human and flawed, but to me, they were perfect. When I was growing up, they showed me love by nurturing me, giving me love, security, chocolate, and cash, and defending me when I needed it. I felt so safe and seen with them. Of course, since we didn't live together, we didn't really have to put up with each other's flaws for long, so it was easy to pass over the problems.

When I was growing spiritually, I had a mentor who spent hours every week feeding me. She would talk with me, listen, invest, buy me lunch, teach me, and put me to work. I learned so much about following God through her. Her impact cannot be measured. She was also perfect for all the same reasons.

All three of these people, and many more in my life, will have my loyalty, devotion, and affection for the rest of my life because of the care they provided for my development.

Have you ever had someone like that in your life, someone who it's so easy to overlook their flaws, who has your devotion?

Here in Corinth, the church also had loyalties. They had strife around which apostle, teacher, pastor, and mentor was better or right. They argued about who to follow and picked teams within the church.

Paul is addressing this church conflict head-on. Though this can be applied personally, this is really a church issue that's being addressed.

Let's keep reading to see what else Paul says about this.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9:

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.

He called himself a servant. There are lots of metaphors here, and more are coming, but there are a few commonalities among all of them. There is work, there is growth, and multiple people are involved in the growth, but one master grower or master builder.

So what we're talking about here is the Corinthians relationship between each other and the church leaders. It seems they have these teams—I follow this person, they follow someone else. We don't know exactly why they are picking teams or dividing. But if we look at the rest of the book, maybe it has more to do with how people lead, and the significance that leader has in their life. In some ways, it seems like they don't know how to work with, respect, and follow people who are different from them, who have a different style or who live out their faith differently. They might have also had issues with fairness, and who or what was most important in the church.

Like my mentor or grandparent who could do no wrong, it's possible they are loyal to people who might have been pivotal in their spiritual development and wanted their way to be followed. And it's causing divisions.

But Paul is not saying that he and the other leaders need to get together and be the same. They aren't created to be the same, nor should they strive to be.

In 1 Corinthians 12, he reminds us that we are all needed parts of the body of Christ. Our differences combined reflect the body of Christ. If we only gravitated and honored the people that thought and acted like us, we wouldn't be the body of Christ, but a body part. It is not only a body part, but a body part that thinks it is reflecting the whole body and is actively rejecting the other parts because it doesn't recognize its place in the body.

This sounds right in theory, but in practice, it is hard. I mean, that's why we're talking about maturity. Have you ever learned some deep lessons from someone you didn't like or trust? It's so annoying at first!

When they are on "team Paul" or "team Apollos", there are still issues to resolve. But Paul is trying to get them to see beyond the conflict.

Here, he gives them the discernment they lack—it is not the people who grow, it is God.

He is saying that they are missing the point that they are all on the same team, that God is the one doing the work and the growth, and if they are on the same team, they shouldn't be divided. To grow up into spiritual adults, they have to fix their conflicts, acknowledge their problems and differences, and find unity in Christ. But, over time, we can be so grateful to God and that person.

So how do they do it? How do we do it?

This is where that spiritual discernment comes in. Paul gives a few thoughts here, but in 10 chapters, he shares a lot more about how to approach each other. If you'd like a refresher, you can skip ahead to 1 Corinthians 13, one of the most quoted passages in scripture.

They needed to discern what was a critical issue to disagree on. Is this toxic to the body of Christ, or is it a different part of the body we don't understand or care for?

When it comes to spiritual matters, this is a surprisingly hard question to answer.

How did the apostles and leaders of the day handle disagreements? We don't have a lot of evidence for disagreement, which speaks volumes to us. I can't

imagine that between all of the disciples who spent so much time in the gospels trying to one-up each other, there weren't leadership disagreements. Yet we don't see strife amongst those who God called to shepherd the churches.

Paul had a sharp disagreement with Barnabus in Acts. In their actions and decisions, they spoke what they thought was right, and parted ways in how they felt they were called. But even as they parted, they remained on the same bigger team.

The church shepherds did not require the assimilation of beliefs. Mostly, they realized they were following the same God, and it was all in his hands. Things only got heated when a big spiritual danger that was affecting the church.

We can learn from them that unity is a critical mark of spiritual maturity and that we need healthy discernment to know when things are spiritually dangerous or maybe an opinion or preference. What do I mean by that? Paul and the other leaders had to consider what was worth personally calling people out over and what was worth agreeing to disagree on.

If each person in this room designed this worship service, we would have hundreds of different types of worship services. If each of us wrote up our beliefs about theologies, we would have hundreds of different versions of beliefs. If we each designed our own small group, we would have hundreds of different ways of doing small groups. Would there be a lot of commonalities? Absolutely. Would there be a lot of differences? Absolutely.

That's actually a good thing. We were each raised in a certain culture. We have unique spiritual journeys. We were each built uniquely to reflect a part of God to the world and to each other. We are each a piece of a whole. Sometimes, we think that unity means we agree with everything. But it makes sense that an arm would want and need different things than a leg or an ear.

Add to that, that we are each in different spiritual maturities. Some of us need milk, and others meat. Our church should have a healthy and diverse spiritual diet so that we can all grow in whatever season we are in.

Again, we do not individually reflect Christ, but together we can wholly reflect Christ.

We have to move from seeing each other as a threat to seeing each other as needed.

We need to value the whole body of Christ.

When we cut out the pieces or people we personally do not resonate with or understand, we are cutting out pieces and people that reflect Christ and the pieces and people who God might be using to grow us into spiritual adults.

The bad news is that there will be spiritual nourishment, styles, programs, and people we aren't clicking with—actions and perspectives we might not understand or agree with. They might bother us or make us uncomfortable. That's okay.

The questions Paul seems to be asking in his writings are:

- Do they believe in and follow God?
- Are they doing anything that is spiritually dangerous?

Ultimately, the question is, are we on the same bigger team? If the answer is yes, it can change the way we approach conversations about our preferences, concerns, and convictions.

But what do we do if we don't trust the person? It is on us to lean into our spiritual discernment pieces. We should pray, lean on scripture, and view that person as being valuable and having a valuable perspective. Then we can engage them with curiosity and ask them to share how they came to certain conclusions or what was behind the action that might be hard for us. Instead of expecting them to be different, we need to be adults who ask questions and engage in dialogue with respect and discernment. We also need to be honest with ourselves about whether our motives are to benefit ourselves or the greater body of Christ.

Paul voiced his concerns and preferences, but he could also discern when something was *critical for the church* and when something was his *perspective or preference*. We should also have gracious and honest conversations about the things that might be stumbling us but with the right attitude towards one another and with the discernment to know the weight of the concern.

Have you ever made an assumption about someone's motives, only to hear their explanation and for it to make perfect sense? I have many examples where I made

assumptions, and I let that assumption break trust or reinforce my negative thoughts. But, I also have many examples where I gave the benefit of the doubt and trust and asked questions to learn.

Once we curiously, graciously, and prayerfully talk to one another, it helps build trust or give insight into potential dangers that need to be further explored. But we are not making assumptions; instead, we are using spiritual discernment.

What might spiritual community look like for us?

I wish I could give you some of the dozens of ways I have not done this well myself, but I will say briefly that I myself have caused strife, and exhausted leaders when I was in college and newer to faith. Like many teenagers and young adults (sorry!), I thought I had all the answers and lacked humility and curiosity. I came to people with convictions and pride, demanding change.

Had I valued the body of Christ (specifically the parts that act differently than me) and come humbly, I would have learned and grown. My convictions probably would have still remained, but my respect for God's diverse people would have grown exponentially. I am sad for the way my attitude contributed towards an air of strife and criticism rather than appreciating the vast number of ways we can worship the Lord.

Here at PBC, I have seen so much strife about similar things: leadership choices, worship service, song selection, purposes of groups and ministries, who should be elevated more, how we serve the community, all types of theologies, misunderstandings, personality differences, and more. I have seen many servants disheartened by how we talk about our concerns. PBC is not unique—we see this in Corinth and in every church around the world. These are all important things to talk about.

But we also need to discern what weight these matters have, and if the people we are talking to are on the same bigger team. We need to acknowledge that there are differences.

There are no commands about how long preaching should be, how much Bible to study in small groups, how much to pray in services, which style of music we should choose, how to run a search committee, or if we should have church membership. These are preferences and longings born out of our own development. We each have different needs that should be seen, we each have

different desires that nurture our relationship with the Lord. But in a community, we will rarely be nurtured the exact way we would like. In a community of God, we look not only to be nurtured, but to help grow those around us. Sometimes, it means laying down our preferences for the sake of the body.

These issues have divided churches everywhere. They can build up resentment and hurt. Unity with these things doesn't mean we sing kum-ba-yah and pretend that these pains aren't real. Unity means having more conversations to gain understanding and discern together. Once we have discerned that we're all following God together, we can also agree to be in process together, to not agree with everything. But when we are having these conversations, we need to have them to build one another up rather than to tear one another down.

The good news is that if we can lean into what it means to be unified but not conformed, we can learn from one another, we can sharpen our discernment with each other, and we can show dignity, respect, and encouragement in the midst of disagreement.

Okay, we have fourteen more verses to go, but these parts reinforce what Paul was mentioning.

1 Corinthians 3:10-17:

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. ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

So here he is pointing out again that there are multiple builders and building materials. He has one main point for the temple (us) and the builders (leaders

in the church). For builders (and I think he means if you are even in any position to be a part of someone growing spiritually, this is you), Paul is reminding you to take care and that your building materials will be tested. This is a reminder that this is a sacred position to be in.

For us being built, we also need discernment about who we let influence us. Again, building materials matter, but really, he's saying that there is no shortcut to spiritual maturity and that we should remember that we and our faith are God's temple and should be treated accordingly.

There is no shortcut to spiritual adulthood.

Side note: saying yes or that you're fine when you're not to get to unity is a shortcut. Paul wants us to truly understand each other and see one another on the same team.

This section is another reminder that God will call multiple people into your life to grow you. We need to trust him as the ultimate grower and builder.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23:

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. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." ²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

Here, Paul reminds us that worldly wisdom is not useful with spiritual discernment, and when we value it too highly, it can actually hinder us from seeing and discerning the spiritual truths. This is a reminder to be humble.

But he leaves us with this encouragement which I want to leave us on. How do we mature in our walk with God? How do we approach conflict and disagreements better?

Only through the power of Christ, only through our firm identity in him. God is the grower. We need not try to grow ourselves but humbly come to him as a child seeking help. We might need to accept that growing

up is hard and that there are people and situations we would rather change, but God is not only in us but with us through it all.

I want to leave you with some opening verses from 1 Corinthians 1:4-8:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our LORD Jesus Christ,⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our LORD Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our LORD.

God is the grower.

I hope we can be thankful to him and thankful for those we disagree with so that we can grow in faith and follow Jesus together.