

Growing In Grace

Getting To Know the Corinthians

Lesson 2

Introduction

1. In our vision for 2008 we have made it a goal to grow up in Christ. One of the ways in which we expect to grow is in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18).
2. This series started with a lesson on Growing in Corinth, where we compared our culture with first century Corinth and found that there are many striking similarities.
3. Since a church existed in Corinth that continued to grow in spite of the fact that it was made up of former sinners who still carried a lot of baggage with them from the world, we too can have hope in reaching our society with the gospel.
4. Although we focused our first lesson on growing this congregation in a culture like Corinth, we need to make sure that we spend our lesson today on getting to know the people we are trying to reach in this Corinthian culture (Col. 4:5-6).
5. A Christian man tells a story about how he sat with an acquaintance and rehearsed an outline of the message of the Christian faith. A few questions were asked by the non-Christian and the best answers and arguments were offered in response. The man agreed with all of the philosophical, logical reasoning. Since this man shook his head, the Christian man thought his hearer was close to a decision to obey the gospel. The question was asked, "So what would keep you from obeying the gospel?" The reply was astonishing. The non-Christian said, "I can see why all of this makes sense to you, but it's just not for me." The Christian responded, "But it is for you. If it makes sense and it is true, then why not obey the gospel?" As more answers were sought, the final reply would haunt this Christian man for years. The non-Christian finally said, "You know, I guess I just don't want to be like you."
6. There are no easy answers to something like that. But we need to understand that there are stereotypes in our Corinthian culture about what a Christian is like. It is not that people don't like who we are, they just have a hard time accepting what they think we represent. We should represent Christ (II Cor. 2:15).
7. Many people in our culture know a lot about what we are against, but little about what we stand for. Often in studies like the one that we mentioned, Christians merely confirm a negative stereotype of a narrow minded, intolerant, arrogant, person who just wants everyone to "be like me". In our postmodern world (even post postmodern world), you cannot separate the messenger from the message. People are saying, "Arguments don't convince me. Show me a faith that is authentically active and attractive and I will consider it." (Read Matt. 5:14-16)

I. Understanding This Corinthian Culture

A. What creates culture?

1. In every location in the world, there are unique cultures created by the sociological, political, religious, and historical paradigms in which people grow up.
2. If the church is to have an impact on society, the first task for its members and leaders is to understand the broader cultural context.

B. How do we reach and teach a culture?

1. The most effective efforts to reach and teach a culture do not try to change the culture or change the message of Christianity. The goal is to contextualize the gospel for each unique culture. We need to become all things to all people that we might save some of them, just as the apostle Paul did (I Cor. 9:19-23)
 2. In every culture, a Christian must consider the factors that have shaped the people he or she seeks to communicate with and reach for Christ:
 - What language do they speak?
 - How do they hear or perceive this message that we bring?
 - What issues are highly sensitive and why?
 - What has happened in the past that put up barriers to obeying the gospel?
 - What metaphors or symbols communicate in positive or negative ways?
 - What styles of communication or stories or art forms or songs best connect?
 - What factors shaped who they are today?
 - How do we contextualize the truths of Scripture for our culture?
- C. What specifically caused our Corinthian culture?
1. The Postmodern Experiment leaves us to ask, “What happened to this generation to produce so much chaos?” When you start listening to stories of neglect, physical abuse, sexual molestation, drug problems, pornography, eating disorders, anger issues, crime rate increases, abortion, STD’s, AIDS you can see how each of these have not only passed from one generation to the next, but they have become more of a problem with each generation.
 2. Radically, Americans went out for a three-decade binge on self, and now our country is vomiting up the consequences uncontrollably (Matt. 9:10-13).
 3. Since the 1960’s several cultural aftershocks have come from the devastating movements that have developed and influence society.
 - Community Aftershock: Air travel, technology, and the globalization of business have increased the speed of life and uprooted the concept of the stable community.
 - Information Aftershock: Television became a standard fixture of western civilization. The internet has also rolled through, creating a global marketplace of ideas, changing the way we interact with other cultures, differing religious views and our own beliefs.
 - Generational Aftershock: Caused by the shift from an outward building of institutions (WWII generation) to an inward building of self (Boomer generation). The age of, “if it feels good, do it”, ushered in the “Me Generation.
 - John Burke said, “We live in a highly fragmented, relationally isolated society. People move, change jobs, get divorced, commute hours each day, travel around the country weekly, then spend all of their free time surfing through over 1700 cable channels and millions of Internet sites, and all at the cost of relationships”. He continued, “Before technology allowed us to fly, drive, and move so easily, people were far more likely to stay put in a local community. Parents, grandparents, siblings, neighborhood friends, parents of friends, store merchants you regularly interacted with all formed a community support network”.

-After looking at all of the days gone by, we must accept that we are living in a 21st century Corinth and we have to work with who we live with. While this may seem difficult and discouraging, this provides an excellent opportunity to the church as most people long for better days, even if those days are unable to be found in the world ever again. That is why it is vital that we are the new support network of our culture. We need to proclaim to the world the abundant life promised by the Lord and then be willing to create an environment where they can thrive and grow with others in this life while in anticipation of the life to come.

II. Helping Our Corinthian Culture

A. Helping With Issues of Trust

1. When a college student talks about being a little girl and she tells stories of the dread and fear that she had when she heard footsteps coming down the hallway to her bedroom because she knew it wasn't daddy coming to tuck her in but to hurt her again, it is obvious why she now lives with bitter anger and rebellion and she cannot seem to trust anyone anymore. Even though she told her mother about what was happening, all that caused was denial and fighting between her parents. This young woman just wanted a sense of security, but who could she trust?
2. Without trust, we cannot engage with others or even with the Lord. Imagine carrying such a negative fatherly image and then being asked to trust in any kind of father again, even a heavenly Father (Ps. 118:5-9).
3. Trust among families comes from knowing that the other person is looking out for our well-being. When this is challenged with hurt and neglect, it is difficult to recover a high level of trust again.
4. There are several areas in which mistrust has been developed:
 - Me-First Mistrust: This was ushered in with the Baby Buster generation that pumped into their children that they were not as important as the other pursuits in life. Having children has been looked upon as a burden in recent years and the level of value placed on children has been diminished.
 - Marital Mistrust: Many kids grew up learning that their mom and dad's "love needs" come first. As soon as birth control was introduced in 1962 the age of "free love" was wide open. With this many sexual diseases and sexual immorality were being discovered among spouses because of unfaithfulness and the divorce rates sky rocketed. This led to the age of the "disappearing dad" which caused a great deal of mistrust. Statistics show a radical change in mindset towards sticking out tough marriages and making sure to work things out for the benefit of raising the kids in a home with both biological parents. As a fact, in the generation following these dilemmas only 50% who reached the age of 17 had both biological parents with them in the same home. Only half of those homes consisted of happy marriages. From 1962 to 1981 the number of divorces tripled. Between 1981 until the present we have seen a trend that suggests that 2 out of 3 marriages end in divorce.
 - Latchkey Mistrust: Through the 1970's the term "latchkey kid" was coined as the number of children under age 14 left alone after school roughly doubled. With dads disappearing and mom being forced into the workforce the

daycares were opened and were flooded with children. Women caring for their children at home fell by half. Instead of coming home to the smell of dinner cooking and a hug from mommy, the house was empty and MTV took the place of mommy. This created a level of mistrust for authority figures that often caused parents to pursue the care of their careers and lifestyles before their own children. This obviously led to an increase in crime rates among children and other mischievous adolescent activity.

-Abusive Mistrust: Since kids learned that they really were not worth caring for they felt they had to fend for themselves. This made the parent-child relationship more egalitarian than authoritarian. Benita Eisler called this relationship an “uneasy equality”. The outcome was that parents were viewed as more childlike while children became more adultlike. The point of saying all of this is to show that child abuse was the direct result of this arrangement. In this era (which still continues today) the deaths of infants and children under the age of 4 increased by 50%. The number of reported cases of child abuse increased fourfold. Women no longer worked because daddy was gone, but because it was their right and the number of children left at home doubled. When children began to rebel and stand up for themselves the parents realized how much authority they had lost. This has led many parents to feel that the only way to put children back in their role as obedient was to abuse them. Children really need parental love and guidance but this is not what they are getting in many cases. Even now a new issue has filled the pages of journals on something that is called “family violence”, where both parent and child have been moved to violence toward one another. Most children who grew up in this environment will usually refuse to accept that their mistrust of others has anything to do with their upbringing in violence...but this is simply not true. Abuse adversely affects our ability to trust others when we are grown.

-In finishing our point on helping our Corinthian culture with mistrust, we need to create a culture to deal with these painful issues openly, with sincerity and honesty. With this we will see two things. First, you will hear open confessions from people who have gone through these difficult times. In addition to this you will hear increasing numbers of people being healed through being a part of God’s family. If Christians fail to prepare and pray so that healing can occur among us from the Postmodern Experiment, we will lose a generation. We must be ready for the struggles of this broken world. Helping our culture will take patience and time as they overcome sin that they face. We need to be a lighthouse that shines at all times to lead others out their moments of darkness even after they have come to the light.

B. Helping With Issues of Tolerance

1. People today have the stereotype that all Christian churches are hateful, judgmental, narrow-minded, bigoted and intolerant. Why would the first question of a guest be, “Are you a loving church?”, “Do you have to dress up to worship here” or even, “How do you feel about gays?” They want to know what we will tolerate.

2. The purpose of these questions is not to challenge our willingness to stand for truth, but because they were raised in an environment of separation and disagreement. They want something to unify and bring us together. They are tired of being torn up and divided. Their cry is, "Can't we all just get along?"
3. Our response to some of the Corinthian's questions has led them to validate the stereotype that we are intolerant. Our approach to answering the concerns of our culture should be carefully selected. While we will never compromise truth, let's remember that the same Lord who saved former idolaters, homosexuals, thieves and drunkards in first century Corinth, has the power to save these same sinners in modern day Corinth. If we create an environment where we are so intolerant of those who are struggling with such sins that they do not feel like they can come as they are and seek the way of truth, then we will never reach and teach our culture and lead them to Christ.
4. Our culture has been slammed by the media with religious scandals, priestly sexual abuse, church leaders in adultery and Christian extremists that ban books, burn down abortion clinics, and carry signs that say, "God hates fags". Even popular cultural television in shows like "The Simpson's" express this radical extremism, when Homer asks his religious neighbor where they have been and they reply, "At a Bible camp, learning how to be more judgmental."
5. Students grow up learning about cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual diversity. They are told that intolerance caused the great wars and hate crimes of the last century. When we show signs of intolerance without allowing our culture to see the love of Jesus mediated through His body, the church, we are seen as a cause of so many of the horrific atrocities in our society. Whether that is fair or not, it is unfortunately the view of our Corinthian culture.
6. To help us navigate through this culture in our efforts to reach those in Corinth we have to remember that the messenger is the message to them. How we are perceived is just as important as the words that we speak. The attitude of the church will either be that of Jesus which was attractive to the sinners that He met due to His compassion and patience with others, or we will validate the stereotype of this world about Christians (bigoted, judgmental etc.) and do a disservice to our Lord. (Romans 2:1-3).
7. The Bible shows us that God is patient toward all sinners and this kindness leads to repentance (Romans 2:4-11). We are to speak the truth in love, not just speak the truth (Eph. 4:15) Our attitude and demeanor have a lot to do with the clarity of the message we express. Remember the patience that the Lord has had with you!

C. Helping With Issues of Truth

1. In many ways, truth has gone relative in our Corinthian culture. This presents a challenge for Christians who proclaim a Savior that claims to be the way, "the truth", and the life (John 14:6).
2. Statistically, in a national survey taken by George Barna, we learned that only one third of Americans believe that moral truth is absolute and unchanging. While our generation would naturally be open to spiritual truth and the dialogue that teaches it, our Corinthian culture has grown tired of competing beliefs. They don't resist truth; they resist arrogance and dogmatism between those who claim to follow the

same Lord. If Jesus is truth, then the best thing we can do is re-present Christ to the world through his church, the body of Christ.

3. People are not asking, “What is true?” They are asking, “Do I want to be like you?” Truth then becomes relational. In other words, we can interpret that language to mean, “If I can see Christ in you and you are an authentic and attractive Christ follower, then I will follow you as you follow Christ” (See I Cor. 11:1). Otherwise people don’t care how true you think something is...they are not interested. People long to experience the deeper realities of a spiritually fulfilling existence rather than just knowing what is true to you.
4. While we are the messengers as His body and we re-present Christ to the world, truth will only be accepted by this postmodern Corinthian culture if we are Christ like. Too many phonies are being denied and rejected by the world.
5. Christ came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and when He ascended into heaven He commissioned us to take on this work. We are to reach and teach lawyers, construction workers, doctors, blue collar and white collar employees, light skinned and dark skinned, the good and the bad on every side of town. Are all people welcomed in this congregation...honestly? We need to treat others like our Lord did when He dealt with Zacchaeus, the thieving tax collector or the Samaritan woman who was shacking up with her sixth man or even the woman caught in the very act of adultery. While we would certainly tell them to “go and sin no more”, would we stone them before we ever had a chance to show them mercy? Often we are like the Pharisees in dealing with such matters. We have stones in hand before we even consult what Jesus says we should do.
6. Just as our brokenness leads us to a daily dependence on a merciful Savior who brings healing for our souls and hope for our future, we need to allow others that same opportunity.

Application

1. We need to make sure that we create an environment where our Corinthian culture can start to learn about and grow closer to the Lord.
2. As we continue to grow in grace this year, let us not forget to show some of God’s grace to those who have broken lives in our community.
3. Remember that our culture wasn’t molded over night. It will take time to lead people to the Lord where their lives can be changed for eternity.
4. Are you one of our Corinthian friends (someone who knows that they have been living in the sin of this world) and you want to give your life to a merciful Savior as you are added to a church family that will help and support you in the Lord?
5. Maybe you are a fellow Christian that has been living more like a Corinthian. Do you need to openly and honestly confess what your difficulties are so we can assist you in overcoming sin? Remember you need to live pure and be an example to others so that they can see Christ living in you. You help this church re-present Christ.
6. God help us to see the needs that we each deal with and grant us wisdom and insight to assist one another as we all desire to spend eternity with the Lord.
7. Let’s take Christ into Corinth in 2008 and re-present Him like never before.