

Growing in the Grace of God

-Growing in Corinth-

By Mark Hatfield

Introduction

1. Can you imagine what it must have been like to work with the church at Corinth in the first century?
 - Being near to the intellectual hub of Athens, first century Corinth took pride in its intellectual pursuits.
 - A large wealthy metropolitan city where people indulged in luxury and comfort.
 - They were entertained by the Isthmian games that were held at the Temple of Poseidon
 - They advocated a full involvement in the pleasures of life.
 - Known for its wild party life and sexual freedom, the Temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love) became a hotspot that was equipped with a thousand temple prostitutes. This temple towered above the city, beckoning all to come and fulfill their sexual appetites.
 - Partying and hedonistic pleasure-seeking was so common that the people came up with the phrase, “to live like a Corinthian” which implied that you dove into these days of drunken, promiscuous living.
2. Paul wrote to a church there and said, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor {the} covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. **Such were some of you...** (1 Cor 6:9-11)
3. I know that that passage continues and says that they had changed, but imagine the work that the Christians had to do to help these Corinthians to come to the Lord. I am almost certain that it was extremely overwhelming and difficult.
4. The Bible mentioned several believers in Corinth, to which Paul connected himself for the work in Corinth. When the Jews rejected Paul in the city synagogue, he turned to the Greeks but with the help of these believers. In Acts 18:7-11, “Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid {any longer} but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’ And he settled {there} a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”
5. That’s right? It was in a place like Corinth that God built this beautiful mess of a church. It was not perfect, but it still held hope for the world around it. This church was functioning in a culture that needed to see the grace of God. In this lesson we will explore what it means for us to be the representation of God’s grace, a reflection of Christ in our community.

I. Growing in Grace Toward Our Corinthian Generation

A. We must reach them

1. This is the generation that the church must reach if it is to survive and thrive.
2. The people in our culture are on a winding, wayward spiritual quest, and the church has an incredible opportunity to be a guide for the journey.
3. The problem is: Time is running out. Not in the sense that we know when the world is coming to an end, but in the sense that even if this world continues, people will be so hardened and given to other religions that our window of opportunity will be made much smaller and the Christian church in America will be unimportant to our culture.
4. The only way that we can change this, is if we start living out the life that Christ demonstrated in this world.

B. We must be Christ to them

1. How do we become the kinds of disciples who help spiritual seekers to enter into the family of God, like Jesus did?
2. The goal is to re-present Christ to the world through His body, the church.
3. We need to be able envision the invisible Christ becoming visible again through us (Gal. 2:20)

C. We must grow in grace toward them

1. Please don't take this the wrong way. We are not advocating throwing in the moral towel and becoming more accepting of error and sin. Some have attempted to do this and it doesn't work. Jesus never tried it because he came to die for sin.
2. The point is, we need to remember our roots. What has God asked us to do in Christ that will help us reach our world?
3. If we keep our priorities straight we will first love God. Secondly, we will love people. Jesus said, that was what it takes. Look at His life and you will see that this is what the Lord lived by.
4. The difficulty is, that it takes a special attitude is a truly changed people to be able to minister to a Corinth.
5. This is where we live now...so we are faced with a major decision.

II. Growing in Grace With Our Corinthian Generation

A. We must love them

1. Looking at Paul letters it is clear that Paul loved the souls of the Corinthians.
2. George Barna, the pollster, wrote, "Our goal cannot be a timid, powerless survival; it must be the role that Christ called the Church to play, that of loving, authoritative, healing, and compelling influence upon the world...lacking such a turn about, we may rightfully anticipate the virtual disappearance of the Christian Church in this nation"
3. Christians don't like to talk about this, because they think it flies in the face of what Jesus said about His kingdom being everlasting. Let's face it, He gave us the job of being on fire and of carrying the load in this labor field. If we do not want to harvest what is ripe and ready then who will? Leave it to secularism and world religions. They will do it.

4. England and Europe are places that are beyond where we are down the post-Christian road. England averages about 7% church attendance for its people and all of Europe runs about the same rate.
 5. Barna and others record that this generation is the first generation in American history in which a majority of those seeking faith will begin their spiritual journey with a faith other than Christianity.
- B. We must meet them where they are
1. Emerging cities of America have much in common with Corinth: wealth, education, leisure, sports and entertainment 24/7, the most religiously diverse population in the world, trumpeting the value of tolerance as the highest virtue, sexually unrestrained like never before, seeking pleasure and personal satisfaction as the prime directive and rejecting absolute truth...absolutely!
 2. We will have to remember that if we are willing to accept the work of meeting these people where they are, then things can get messy. As a matter of fact, things will have to get messy if we are going to be effective in helping our fellow man.
 3. In many ways, we don't know what to expect. This may come as a surprise to you, but neither does our Corinthian culture.
 4. Most people do not have an accurate rendering of what Christianity is all about. The Post-modern experiment has created a generation of wounded, broken, spiritually starved, but hungry people.
 5. Here is a fact to open your eyes. The United States has more secular, unchurched people than most nations of the world., yet many churches don't operate on this reality.
 6. Paul was a visionary who was willing to see the outcome of his labor, even though for a while he had to be where the Corinthian people were and he had to deal with their problems and shortcomings. Just look at the first Corinthian letter and you will see what I am talking about (religious baggage, fighting and sexual impurity with a man having his father's wife)
 7. Here is an important question that was asked by John Burke: Are we raising up a generation of leaders ready to lay down their comfortable lives to dive into the muck of cultural America? Or are we just playing church--developing spiritual dependents who consume the goods off of whichever church shelf with "feed me" or "puff me up with knowledge" or even "feel postmodern"?
 8. The Lord never told us to stand on the top of a cliff where below our world has been destroyed by a cultural mudslide and then reprimand them for not getting out and climbing up the embankment to higher ground. Our heroic 5 step lifelines cannot be thrown with the intention to save. No longer can we bemoan the circumstances and only pray, asking for days gone by.
 9. It is time that we realize that as we are tethered to God's loving hand, we can take on this mission of heading into the swirling muck of the cultural disaster. We must become all things to all that we might save some. Paul didn't live out of the world when he reached the lost and neither did the Lord.

10. Remember though, that it is not us that are causing the results, but we are working as Christ (i.e. His body) to swim into this radical environment to assist in completing this desperate mission

C. We must help them to see God's grace.

1. Paul said that we are God's coworkers. We are at work with Him in this great mission, or should I say commission.
2. Paul could use language like, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God has been making it grow" (I Cor. 3:6-9).
3. While the other mission sounded more adventurous, we in reality have been called to become cultural farmers. We must do the work of spreading the word of God (seed) and then showing other love and grace (watering) and God will give us the results.
4. We need to create a healthy environment in the Lord's church for people to come and be nurtured. Often the lack of this environment causes people to miss seeing Christ again in His body. Jesus was full of compassion, love and tender mercy.
5. Did you ever stop to think that the farmer has nothing to do with the growth. But if he neglects the soil and does help care for that which is planted, then hardness sets into the soil and the fruit is lost. How many times have you heard of some congregation that has grown discouraged saying, (in a sour and distraught voice) "Well we are preaching the word of God and telling people the truth about what God wants them to do to repent and change". What shame! They forgot perhaps the process of growth.
6. Listen to this: Research shows that children in loving, secure, truth-speaking family environments tend to thrive. It is the family culture that most influences healthy growth toward maturity. Now apply that to the church. You get the point. We want others to become children of God and obedient healthy children at that. How are we doing with showing grace toward our culture? Change and growth will come.
7. The nice thing is that we don't have to change people, we just have to love them enough to lead them to the grace of God. It's not about candles in a building, it is about community in a people. Its not religious art on the walls, but attitudes in our hearts. Its not liturgy, but love that will make a difference in this broken world.
8. "Culture encompasses the normal practices and behaviors of people as they determine what, why, or how they act or interact. But it is also the sum of all behaviors, attitudes and styles of the people, programs and services."
9. If we are unhappy with the way our culture is going, then what kind of culture will we show them in the body of Christ that will be call them to make a change?
10. What "vibe" are we sending to the world? Are we genuine in our service and joyous when we sing? Do we take seriously the work that God has called us to do and do we live it each day? Do we live by God's word and refrain from adding manmade religious stipulations on other?

11. As the body of Christ we should have the vision of Christ but we need to remember how we must work together to do what He needs us to do. He called us the body!
12. Also, we must not organize the body in a way that will make it too rigid, where everyone is unable to function with the other parts. At the same time, we must have some organizational backbone, but must extend that from the head, which is Jesus Christ.

Application

1. “Just as there are no perfect people, there are no perfect churches” says John Burke.
2. I am not asking you to be perfect, I am asking you to be complete in the Lord. That is what the Bible means when it asks us to be perfect.
3. We will talk more about that in later lessons. One man said it like this, “I am not perfect, just forgiven” That is where we all are if we are Christians.
4. If you are interested in following Christ, let us help you and you can be a part of a spiritual family where you can help us re-present Christ to the world. It all starts with you making a decision to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and putting Him on in baptism.
5. You may respond during the following song.