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Eating at the Big Table – 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

- when you were growing up, how many of you on holidays, had to eat at the little table?...
 - is that pretty much a universal experience?...
 - when we went to my grandmother's, all the adults sat at the big table, and then there was a card table set up somewhere else in the house with smaller chairs and smaller dishes and fewer food choices—that was the little table...
 - the smallest kids sat at the little table...
 - and it was always a rite of passage when you finally graduated to the “big table”...
 - can you imagine going to one of those holiday gatherings and there's the four year old twins at the little table...and they have their bibs on and their sippy cups and they're spilling food all over the place...
 - and then there's a few older kids who are goofing around and throwing food at each other and making a general nuisance of themselves...
 - all of that would be perfectly normal...
 - but then let's say, right in the middle of all of that is 45 year old uncle Bill...and he's wearing a bib, and he's drinking from a sippy cup, and he's throwing his food around too...
 - something would be dramatically wrong with that picture...behavior that is acceptable at one age, and maybe even a bit cute and humorous, that changes when a person reaches a certain age...at some point you're expected to have the desire and the maturity to eat at the big table...
- well, you can probably anticipate where this is going...the exact same thing is true of followers of Christ...
- when a person first becomes a Christian, there are certain characteristics that usually go with that phase of life that we wouldn't necessarily say are cute, but at least there's not surprising, they're not out of the ordinary...
 - we expect new believers to possess a level of immaturity and we joyfully deal with whatever challenges come with that period of life...
 - but at some point – it's time to move up to the big table...and when a person doesn't, they are as out of place as uncle Bill with his bib and sippy cup...
 - the question for you and me this morning would be...are we progressing out of spiritual infancy?...
 - with that in mind, please open your Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 3 – page 131 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- our theme this year is **Taking the Next Step...with Joy...**
- Paul was writing to this church that he had had the privilege of starting on his second missionary journey...you can read about that in Acts 18...
- the problem now was, they were still sitting at the little table...they were struggling with habits that by now should have been conquered...
- and that was manifesting itself especially in division in their church family and something needed to be done...so Paul writes them a letter and addresses the issue head-on.
- one of the problems was their desire to be viewed by others as being smart, or intelligent, so they had divided up by allegiance to different teachers...
 - I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Peter...

- and the idea was – my guy’s smart, and because he’s my guy, that makes me smarter than you...
- and Paul says – the gospel was never intended to make you look smart to the outside world...
 - in fact, its message appears to be foolishness to those without Christ...a crucified Messiah...those words don’t even go together...your king died – what kind of king is that?...
 - then there’s the recipients...there aren’t many wise people, or noble people in the church...there may be some...but the church was never intended to be country club Baptist – it’s not the home of the smart, beautiful, well-heeled individuals...
 - Paul’s exact words were – God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise...it’s more like misfit Baptist, or “trophies of grace” Baptist, or sordid past Baptist...
 - so the message appears to be foolish, and so do the recipients...
 - and then there was the manner in which it was proclaimed...
 - Paul said – I didn’t come as some polished orator filled with self-confidence and charisma...he said, I came in weakness and fear and much trembling...
 - and the goal was that the focus would be on the grace of God, and the beauty and wisdom of the gospel for those who have chosen to repent and believe...
 - but it would never cross our minds to use some aspect of our faith as a reason to boast in ourselves...the gospel should humble us, not fill us with pride...
 - that’s why chapter 1 verse 29 has that crucial purpose clause – so that no man may boast before the Lord...
 - and if the Corinthians would get that point, it would draw them together in humility instead of these endless divisions because of their pride...
 - last week we saw that chapter 2 emphasizes the place of the Holy Spirit in all of this...
 - they were to depend on the Holy Spirit for the focus of their message, and the source of their message, and the success of their message – because the Holy Spirit’s job is to help them organize their lives around “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified...”
- that’s all well and good – but the problem is – many of the people in that church are not buying that message – at least not yet...
- when you open the doors of their church-house, you see a bunch of people with bibs on, and sippy cups, throwing food around...sitting at the little table...Paul has to love them enough to speak directly with them about that matter, especially from the perspective of what they could do to move out of that condition...

- read 1 Corinthians 3:1-9...

- we’re talking this morning about **Eating at the Big Table**...and with the time we have left, let’s look for **three principles to help us move on to spiritual maturity**.

I. Spiritual Infancy is Designed to Be a Temporary Condition – v. 1.

- now, let’s be clear about this...

A. Being a babe in Christ is a delightful thing.

- it’s just like when a family around here has a baby, we all celebrate and rejoice...and around this church we have something to celebrate practically every week and we do...
- that is especially true spiritually, and God uses the metaphor of “new birth” to help us think about the excitement of a man or woman admitting their sin and placing their faith and trust in Christ...

- consider these passages:
 - **John 1:12-13 - But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**
 - **John 3:1-3 - Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**
 - **John 3:6-7 - “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’**
 - it’s interesting that John said at the end of his gospel... **John 20:30-31 - Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.**
 - many men and women have come to Christ by simply reading through the gospel of John...and when they were done they trusted Christ and became babes in Christ...Peter emphasized this metaphor as well..
 - **1 Peter 1:3 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,**
 - **1 Peter 1:23 - for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.**
 - those are some precious verses in the Bible and they revolve around this image of experiencing a spiritual birth...we won’t take the time to do so, but this theme becomes very prevalent in the epistles of John...here’s one example:
 - **1 John 5:1 - Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.**
- we also won’t take time to trace this idea through the book of Acts, but passage after passage celebrates the number of men and women who became followers of Christ...those were times of great rejoicing...
- the same is true here – we put a significant amount of effort and resources into proclaiming the gospel in our town and around the world with the prayer and hope that men and women will repent and believe...so, being a babe in Christ is a delightful thing...however...

B. God does not want you to stay in that condition for long.

- that was the problem in the Corinthian church...
- Paul said – I could not speak to you as spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.
- now, if you’re trying to put all of this together, especially from the perspective of how it might apply to you, you should probably have several questions...the chief one being...well, does Paul think these people knew the Lord or not?...
- well remember, the primary subject in the entire previous chapter was the place of the Holy Spirit in their lives...

- and chapter 2 ended with the words – **2:16 - We have the mind of Christ...**
- then in chapter 3, verse 1, he calls them what?...**3:1 - brethren...**
- so we would have to conclude that he believed the persons in the Corinthian church were Christians, they were believers...
 - but they weren't spiritual people...**3:1 – I could not speak to you as spiritual men**
 - now you might say – wait, just last week you mentioned **Romans 8:9 - ...you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.**
 - so – how could they be Christians without being spiritual people?...
- the answer comes from understanding the difference between positional truth and practical truth...
 - positional truth is what happens the moment you're saved...it's instantaneous, unchanging, a direct result of trusting Christ as Lord and Savior, and requires no effort on your part...
 - for example, when we read in I Peter 2:9 – you are holy – he's referring to your position in Christ --- on the account books of heaven, you are viewed as being clothed in the righteousness of Christ – you are holy...
 - but he also says in the same book – “be ye holy” (1:15)...that's practical truth...this is what needs to be occurring in your life each day because of your position...
 - so positional truth is instantaneous – practical truth is progressive...
 - positional truth is unchanging – practical truth is constantly changing, for good or bad...
 - positional truth requires no effort on your part – practical truth requires great expenditure of effort, but always in cooperation with the Spirit of God...
 - now, let's take a quiz...at the end of chapter 2, verse 16 – **1 Corinthians 2:16 - ...But we have the mind of Christ...**is that positional truth or practical truth?...it's positional, that is true of any Christian, and it happened the moment you were saved...
 - now consider this passage from the book of Philippians... **Philippians 2:5 - Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus...**is that positional, or practical?...it's practical...this is what you need to be working on each and every day...
 - now, let's take all of that into verse 1...when Paul says – I could not speak to you as spiritual men...was he speaking positionally, or practically?...
 - in other words, was he saying – I could not speak to you as spiritual men because you did not possess the Holy Spirit?...or because they were not acting in a spiritually minded way?...
 - it's the latter...see, they had the Holy Spirit...they had access to God's truth...but they were living in a fleshly way...they were not growing in Christ...they were a lot like they were before they came to Christ...very little growth, still wearing their spiritual pampers...
- and the overall point here is...spiritual infancy is fine for a short while, but it is designed to be a temporary condition...and if you continue there for very long, it will become problematic for you and displeasing to the Lord who saved you...
- it's like this – if we all took a field-trip to the nursery and looked at the little newborns...they get away with murder down there...
 - they slur their sounds and everyone applauds...

- they burp out loud and people cheer...
- they do all kinds of things down there I'm not going to get into...
- but you go home as an adult and try to get away with some of that at the dinner table...you'll find yourself eating your dinner on the back porch with the dog...
- we all know that and we all accept it, physically...
- well, Paul's point is – it ought to be truer spiritually...lose the pampers is the overall point here...
- now, there's an obvious question, isn't there?...if God wanted to work in your heart and life today (and I'm fairly certain that He does, aren't you), could He interact with you as a spiritual man (or woman), or would it still have to be like working with an infant?...
- now, you might say – well, I'm not sure...the next verses can help us answer that question with more clarity...you could summarize them with this point...

II. Learn to Avoid the Tendencies that Prevent Maturity – 2-4.

- see, what is a perpetual spiritual infant like?

A. Can't (won't) digest the meat of God's Word.

1 Corinthians 3:2 - I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

- now it is very important that we understand what Paul means when he talks about “the meat of God's Word...”
- let me ask you to turn over to Hebrews chapter 5 (you'll probably want to keep your hand in I Corinthians 3 because we'll be back here) – but look at Hebrews 5 (page 171 of the Bible under the chair in front of you) because the writer of Hebrews develops this idea in more detail...
- here's what we're going to find...the meat of the word is not prophecy (biblical teaching about the end times)...
 - Paul's not talking about a person who can draw out some precise chart listing all the events of the end times in the proper sequence as if that would be proof that they digested the meatiest aspects of Scripture...
 - nor is he talking about some thorny theological question...he's not saying, if you've really digested the meat of the Word, you'll be able to answer questions like, can God make a rock bigger than he can pick up, or, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin...etc...
- see, the meat of the Word is not prophecy or thorny theological questions...
- instead, look at what Hebrews 5:11 tells us...(read Hebrews 5:11-14)
- here's the point – the meat of the Word is that aspect of Scripture that causes us to grow in righteousness...it forces us to discern good from evil...
- the meat of God's Word causes us to change...
- for example – to say that Jesus died on the cross – that's milk – it's essential because you cannot become a babe in Christ without it – but there are meaty aspects of that truth as well...
- so, when a person says, because Christ died on the cross, I can and I must crucify my sinful desires each and every day...that's meat – my senses are being trained to discern good from evil...
- and Paul says – a spiritual infant, a fleshly minded person, will choke on that kind of applicational content...they'll argue about it, they'll try to find ways around it...a fleshly person wants no part of that kind of applicational diet...
- see, that's really the point here – you can tell how spiritual a person is by examining his/her diet...

- in fact, it would be good for each of us to ask, what does my spiritual diet reveal about the degree of my maturity in Christ?...
 - a spiritual person hungers and thirsts after righteousness...they want to bring their practice in line with their position...
 - a spiritual person wants to hear the Word of God expounded and explained...
 - a spiritual person wants to hear how the truth of God's Word should be affecting them today...they want accountability...they want meat...
- that's why we are constantly encouraging people around here to read good books...to be studying truths that can help you have a greater understanding of God's Word, especially from the perspective of how you can be practically growing...
- but some Christians spend so much time in front of the TV, or so much time on the Internet, or whatever...it's junk food night after night and then they wonder why developing spiritual muscle seems so illusive...
- on the other hand, I know that there are many people who could honestly say – you know, I'm out of pampers...I've got a long way to go...but I'm not an infant anymore...it's not just milk and sippy cups...
 - people say to me – I just finished reading the first book cover to cover that I've read for years...and I'm glad I did...and I'm ready for another one...
 - or I just was able to get a particular sinful habit behind me...and I know I have a long way to go...but my senses are a bit more trained to discerning good from evil...that's called moving up to the big table...
 - back in 1 Corinthians 3, here's another tendency that prevents maturity---do you see it in verse 3...

B. Jealousy

- **v. 3 – For you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy...**
- because they were not interested in the meat of God's Word that produces righteousness, there's all kinds of associated sins...
- so instead of rejoicing with someone else whom God has blessed, there's an inner attitude that begrudges someone else of what you wish you had...
- that's little table behavior...
 - one kid has something, and everybody wants it...
 - and we've all seen it – they start bawling, and screaming, and trying to take it from the person who has it...
 - and it doesn't even matter if they like it...
 - you could give one kid a hunk of liver...and they'd all scream for it...
 - when we first visited the blind school with Drew years ago, one of the teachers told us that the kids would fight over who had what color crayon...
 - and we said – well, they can't see the color...how would they know...
 - and the teacher said, they ask – what color do I have—red, what color does he have—blue, I want blue...I don't even know what blue is, but I want it because he has it...
- we'll see that when we get deeper in this book – but there were people who were actually fighting over spiritual gifts...instead of celebrating the giftedness God had given various members of the body – they fought about it...
- there were also fights about wealth...and who had what kind of food at the Lord's table taking one another to court...
- but when people are immature, they will find something to fight over...

C. Strife and division.

- v. 3 – For since there is jealousy and strife among you.
- Jealousy and strife are not the least of the symptoms of fleshly living. Those sins are more destructive than many Christians seem to think. They are far from being petty sins, because, among other things, they cause division in the church, Christ's body, for whom He gave His life. They are among the surest marks of fallen humanness, just as unity is one of the surest marks of divine transformation (John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians).

- Paul's summary comment for all of this was...

D. No visible testimony of God's work in your life.

- v. 3 – and are you not walking like mere men?

- you get the sense of profound sadness as Paul looks over at the Corinthian church and says—you're carnal, fleshly, you're not growing, you can't be left alone...and look at the terrible effects...
- one of the saddest things in all the world is to see individuals and churches where folks aren't growing and becoming more spiritual...
- you may know of individuals like that where you have the opportunity to visit from time to time, but each time you go back it's the same fleshly habits...
- even though the person claims to be a Christian, he doesn't treat his wife any better...
- and the wife is as harsh with her tongue as she always was...
- they're not handling life any differently---in fact, they are like unbelievers...like mere men...
- and the other side is true as well...
- and of the most exciting and invigorating aspects of church life is when individuals are becoming less and less fleshly and more and more spiritual...
 - their love for God is increasing....
 - they are leaving their unbelieving habits behind...
 - they have a unifying effect on the church...
- [develop – your brother in law – Tim – don't see him very often, but have enjoyed watching his spiritual maturity – now the chairman of the elders at their church, and God has been blessing them with a season of unusual growth...and he's right in the middle of it...it is delightful to see men and women behave like something other than mere men...]

III. Focus on the Source of Growth, Not the Delivery Personnel – v. 5-9

- the Corinthians were dividing up among which teacher they liked the most...
- that was incredibly immature...because the teachers had very little to do with anything positive happening in the church...sure some planted, and others watered...but the increase belonged to God...He's the one they should have been rallying around, not their favorite person in the church...
- don't confuse the source with the delivery personnel...
- it was like when Kris and I were dating....long before cell phones, e-mail, and tweeting...
- we were 600 miles apart, and long-distance phone calls were incredibly expensive...so we got to know one another through writing letters...writing, like with a pen and a piece of paper...I know that is a foreign concept to many of you...

- but I don't mind telling that those letters became precious...
- well, can you imagine if the summer I came home from college before our wedding, if Kris said – I've decided not to marry you, I'm going to marry the mailman...
- the mailman, why the mailman...because he brought me such wonderful letters...day after day after day...
 - what's the mailman got to do with it...
 - I wrote them, I sent them, I paid for the stamp...he just delivered them...
- that's what the Corinthians were doing...in their immaturity...they were confusing the source of growth with the one who had simply planted or watered...
- [conclusion – how would rate yourself on the “becoming more of a spiritual person and less of an infant meter?...and what steps would God want you to take in the days ahead to make specific progress?]....