

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

1 CORINTHIANS 3-4

There's an old American folk song called "Billy Boy." Charming Billy is in love with a girl who is apparently too young to leave home. When you sing the chorus, "she's a young thing and cannot leave her mother," you get the impression Billy's girlfriend is still a teenager.

But listen to the lyrics, "How old is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy? How old is she, charming Billy? Three times six, and four times seven, twenty-eight and eleven - she's a young thing and cannot leave her mother."

Add it up and Billy's girl is not such a young thing after all. *It you're good at math*, she's actually 85 years old! *Suddenly you're concerned about Billy's girl*. This is a folk song about a dysfunctional person. By the time you're 85 years old you're expected to grow up and move out. You're no longer a child, but an adult.

And this was Paul's concern for the Christians in Corinth. At this stage in the life of the church he expected them to show some maturity. Instead, they were acting like "babes." They were believers, but there was dysfunction. They weren't growing up. Paul coins a term to describe them. He calls them, "carnal."

Chapter 3 begins, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ." In chapter 2 Paul divided humanity into two groups - the natural man and the spiritual man.

The natural man doesn't know God. Man is a sinner by nature - born alienated from God. Left to himself he spirals to destruction. Sin and rebellion, ignorance and prejudice, come natural for the natural man.

But the spiritual man is alive to God. God's Spirit dwells in him. He also sins at times, but it grieves him when he does. It goes against his new nature. Deep inside him, his desire is to please God and love others.

But now in Chapter 3 Paul brings up another type of person. He calls him the "carnal man." The Latin word "carne" means "flesh." I think about this when I eat a bowl of Kathy's chili. She puts meat - lots of flesh - in her chili - it's "chili con carne" or "chili with meat."

And "carne" describes the believer who lives a life oriented toward the flesh. *He possesses God's Spirit, but isn't possessed by God's Spirit*. He hasn't allowed the Holy Spirit to shape and color his outlook. His life is governed by natural, physical appetites. **He has God's Spirit, but lives as if he doesn't.** Paul refers to such a person as a carnal Christian - a "babe in Christ."

And carnal Christians show the same behavior you'd see in the nursery... *If they don't get their way, or aren't the center of attention, they cry and pout...* They can't stand on their own, and need other people to prop them up... *They lack discernment,*

and become vulnerable to deception... Because of their short attention span they get easily distracted... And they don't feed themselves, they have to be fed by others...

Realize, if you've been born again a few weeks this is an understandable dilemma. You're a babe in Christ. It takes time to mature. But if you've been a Christian for years and you're still *carnal*, something is dysfunctional. You need to identify it, repent, and grow.

Nowhere in Scripture do we see playpens and burping bibs in heaven. Along the way, from earth to heaven, God expects His people to grow and mature.

When my daughter-in-law, Jess, was pregnant she got a unique baby shower gift - a "pee-pee teepee." It's a device that aids in changing a baby boy's diaper. A washable cloth cone, caps off a certain part of the male anatomy. This protects the diaper-changer from being fired on by an uncontrolled bladder. It's a great idea, but it's clearly a temporary fix. The real goal is for the young man to gain a sustained control of his bladder.

This is God's goal for us. Rather than be carnal, He wants us to live under the influence of His Spirit. This is why God doesn't take us to heaven the moment we're saved. He leaves us in this wicked world. He subjects us to trials and temptation. It's this resistance training that builds endurance and teaches us to trust in Him!

Paul tells the Corinthians in verse 2, "I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able."

Here's another characteristic of a carnal Christian. He drinks milk when he needs to be eating solid food.

It's cute to watch a newborn suck a bottle, but a teenager still on the bottle is an alarming problem. This was the case with the believers in Corinth. They had an immature approach to Scripture. They were sucking on the basics, rather than cultivating an appetite for meatier truths. Hebrews 5:13-14 describes the dilemma, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age."

Realize, a spiritual babe reads Bible stories. A mature believer studies Bible doctrine... A babe wants to know about God. The mature seeks to know Him personally... A babe marvels at what God does. The mature worships who God is... A babe learns biblical principles. The mature gains a biblical perspective... A babe fills his mind with facts. The mature fills his heart with love... Again, it's okay to be a babe for a season. But too many believers stay there. They never graduate kindergarten, and become spiritually mature.

Paul says to the Corinthians, "for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?"

A definite mark of carnality is friction and division. You'd expect to see quarrels, and fighting, and biting, and selfishness in the church nursery, but not in the sanctuary. Babies squabble, not the spiritually mature.

Apparently, Corinth's worship services resembled the toddler room. Paul writes, "For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?" Kids fight over trivial, selfish stuff. You can hear them on the playground. "My dad is stronger than your dad..." "No way, my dad can whip your dad!"

Little kids take pride in human heroes - in celebrities. And this was the situation in the Corinthian church. The believers had polarized around their favorite pastors.

Of course this happens today... Teenagers gravitate toward the young, handsome pastors... The ladies have their favorite teachers... Georgia Tech folk, like birds of a feather flock together... Hipsters seek out the cool pastors... Old folks like the same ole, same ole...

I understand, that each pastor has his own flavor and style - and that's okay. I believe God creates a *wide array of pastors* to reach a *wide variety of people*.

But it's wrong when we accentuate the differences in a prideful way, as if one teacher and His followers are holier than another. We need *cooperation* not *competition*! **Despite our differences we are one Body.**

Verse 5, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?" *Why get excited about the messenger?* It's Jesus who saves, not His messenger.

Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." In Corinth, Paul had planted the Gospel seeds. Apollos had watered them. But in Ephesus, the roles were reversed. Apollos planted and Paul watered.

God uses His messengers to touch different people at different points in their life. I've spent years with people sowing seeds, and watering them in prayer, and saw very little fruit... Whereas, there were times when I just bumped into a guy and got to lead him to Christ...

God uses us in different ways at different times. But always, without exception, it's God who supplies the miracle of new life. It's "God who gives the increase."

Once an agricultural school in Iowa studied the elements needed to grow 100 bushels of corn on an acre of land. Here's a partial list of the ingredients, "Four million pounds of water, 6,800 pounds of oxygen, 5,200 pounds of carbon, 160 pounds of nitrogen, 125 pounds of potassium, 75 pounds of sulphur, etc. etc."

The researchers estimate less than 5% of what it takes to produce a crop of corn is supplied by the farmer. God supplies the lion's share of the resources!

The same is true of the spiritual harvest... Compared to the work of the Holy Spirit, our role in the saving of souls is minor. We can **sow** the Word, but we can't make it **grow** in a heart. Nothing happens eternally or spiritually unless God's Spirit is involved. It's always "God who gives the increase," thus, He gets the glory!

Verse 8, “Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, *you are God’s building.*”

Christians are on the same team, we have the same goals, and *serve the same Boss*. He’ll reward us not by the size of our ministry - or its influence - but if we’re faithful to the task He assigns to us. We don’t get to choose our task. God chooses. Our job is to be faithful.

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.” Architects know the foundation is the most important part of a structure. The stronger the foundation the safer the building, and this is true for spiritual construction - *for believers and in churches.*

Verse 11, “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Here’s the solid foundation on which every Christian ministry should be built, “*Jesus Christ.*” Anchor a ministry to a *social cause, or a pet doctrine, or an experiential phenomena, or a political objective, or a style of worship, or an exciting personality* - and you’re building on a shaky foundation! But if you want a Christian ministry to last, build it so that it points folks to Jesus!

Verse 12, “Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.*”

When you erect a building in our county you can’t just slap up a structure - you have to comply to building codes. And God also has His building codes. In serving God, and in building His church, there’re guidelines.

I grew up in a church with a prideful pastor. He liked to push people around to get his way... One day my mom and I were discussing it, and she defended him. She sighed, “*Yea, but he led a lot of people to Christ.*”

That’s when God spoke to me through my own words. “*But mom, in ministry the ends never justifies the means.*” And it still doesn’t. That’s what Paul is teaching us here. One day our works will be judged...

The Bible speaks of three end-time judgments... In Matthew 25 the nations are gathered to be judged in the Valley of Decision. In Revelation 20 unbelievers are tried and condemned at God’s Great White Throne. But believers in Jesus will appear before the *Bema Seat, or Judgment Seat of Christ*. This is Paul’s focus here.

Unbelievers will be judged by their works, whether good or evil. Whereas, Christians are saved by faith, not works. But our works of service after we’re saved, will be tested. God will reveal “*of what sort*” they were. He’ll expose the motive behind our acts of service...

The times you taught Sunday School *grumbling because you had to get up early to babysit a bunch of snotty-nosed kids... the time you ushered, and hurried folks along so you could get home and watch football...*

Those acts of service will be like *“wood, hay, straw”* in the fire. They’ll look impressive going in, but the fire of God’s holiness will burn them to ashes... Whereas, *the time you jumped out of bed eager to love the little ones for Jesus... the time you led worship with a smile, and put out some extra effort...* when those acts of service pass through God’s holiness they’ll come through un-singed - like *“gold, silver, precious stones.”*

Verse 14, *“If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”* Again, we’re saved by the blood of Jesus. Our soul escapes judgment, because Jesus passed through the fire for us... But our service will be tested to see *“of what sort it is...”*

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.”

In the OT Temple the priests never defiled or polluted what was dedicated to God. This principle carries over to the NT. Today, God’s Temple is the church - and church-work like Temple-work should never be polluted with bitterness, or jealousy, or manipulation, or greed. Christian service should be holy and glorifying to God!

Verse 18, *“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”*

And to prove his point, Paul quotes from the OT. Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11, *“For it is written, “He catches the wise in their own craftiness”; and again, “The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”*

He reminds the Corinthians not to become proud of their knowledge. Chapter 1 taught us God isn’t revealed through human wisdom, *but simple faith*. Up against God’s wisdom, we’re all just a bunch of bozos.

“Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”

The splinter groups in Corinth acted like they had an exclusive claim on a favorite teacher, as if he belonged to them. Yet the church is a family and what belongs to one belongs to all. We’re about sharing, not hoarding.

There is no private property in the kingdom of Christ. The Bible, the power of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel, grace, heaven, the rapture is *not just mine, but ours*. All that belongs to the Father is shared by His children

Chapter 4, “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Notice, Paul describes a Christian minister two ways: “*servants of Christ*” and “*stewards of the mysteries of God.*”

The Greek word translated, “*servant*” means “*under rower.*” It reminds me of the famous scene from the movie, Ben Hur. Slaves were chained to oars below deck in the Roman galley ships. Two columns of men rowed to the Roman cadence. They kept pace with a drum and a whip. The slaves had no say in the speed the boat was traveling, and how hard they had to row. Their only job was to follow orders... *Well, welcome to Christian ministry!* Our job is to row to God’s cadence.

If you want to be involved in ministry for God at any level, the job title is “*servant or under rower.*” Somewhere along the line in our culture the word “*minister*” gained an exalted status, but the Lord never called anyone to be a *star*, or a *celebrity* - just *servant*.

The Assistant Pastor for years at the first Calvary Chapel was Pastor Romaine, and he’d tell young pastors, “*Serve the Lord as if you’re serving in only your underwear.*” If so, you won’t seek the attention of people! You’ll serve; then you’ll get out of the spotlight.

We are “*servants of Christ,*” but we are also “*stewards of the mysteries of God.*” A “*steward*” was a household manager. This was a trusted slave in charge of his Master’s house. He was expected to manage the household affairs with His Master’s interests in mind.

And likewise, God entrusts us with incredible spiritual resources. We’re to handle them *wisely*, not *wastefully*.

And note the steward’s lone priority, verse 2, “*Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*” **Not successful necessarily, but faithful.**

We live in a world preoccupied with success and its symbols. Even in church often the worth of a person’s ministry is measured by *budgets, and buildings, and data bases* - *bucks in the bank and buns in the seats.*

But you can have great numbers - *loads of nickels and noses* - and still not be pleasing to God. *The Mormons have lots of people, but they’re heretical not faithful...* Don’t be deceived. True success in ministry is determined by one quality - are you “*faithful?*” Have you been obedient to what God called you to do?

When Mount Vesuvius erupted it covered the cityscape of Pompeii under a blanket of lava. Years later when the ruins were searched a sentinel was found encased in the lava - still standing by the gate.

Even in the chaos of the eruption the man never left his post. Like a good steward, when the smoke cleared, he was “*found faithful.*” And this should be our goal as *servants and stewards* of our Lord Jesus!

Verse 3, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court.” Paul’s critics were accusing him of being unfaithful. And in the next verses Paul answers their charges in three ways...

First, he says, “In fact, I do not even judge myself...” Rather than *rake himself over the coals*, he rests in God’s grace. **Rather than inward Paul looks upward.**

Some Christians I know are into self-examination. They spend enormous time and energy searching their own heart for hidden sins. Actually, their effort is wasted time. This is **not** how Paul dealt with his sin.

Instead of *digging for sin*, Paul *reached for the heavens*. He focused on knowing Christ, and trusted the Lord to bring to light the flaws he needed to address. **Too much introspection causes depression.** Spend all your time **looking for sin**, and you’ll have little time leftover to **look to Jesus**. Faith grows only when we take our eyes off ourselves and fix them on Jesus.

Second, Paul makes the comment, “For I know of nothing against myself (in essence, *he has a clean conscience*), yet I am not justified by this...” God created in us a moral compass. The conscience helps us discern right from wrong. But it can be deceiving...

Proverbs 14:12 warns us, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Some people are vulnerable to blind spots that our conscience doesn’t pick up. Sin is like a crumb in your beard, without a mirror, you’re the last one to see it!

And this is why for Paul, Jesus was his only Judge. “But He who judges me is the Lord.” Paul didn’t answer to his critics in Corinth. The Lord Jesus was his Judge.

Then **third**, Paul realized all permanent judgments won’t be made until Jesus returns. He says in verse 5, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.” Remember in the here and now, none of us are in position to see the whole picture. Only the Lord Jesus has all the facts...

Once, a couple came to me for pre-marital counseling. When it surfaced they were living together I suggested they separate until the wedding night. *Suddenly, the girl bolted from the room in tears...*

It turned out a few weeks earlier her apartment had been broken into, and she’d been raped. Her boyfriend was sleeping on the couch for her protection. I apologized for jumping to a conclusion before I knew the whole story. Only Jesus can read our true motive.

This is why we need to leave the judgment of a person’s heart to that person and his Master. Only at Jesus’ return will our hearts be fully revealed and our motives disclosed. Until that day, don’t jump the gun!

Verse 6, “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.” Paul uses himself and Apollos as examples to get at the root cause of their divisions. Sadly, Corinthians loyal to Apollos degraded Paul. And those loyal to Paul, also put down Apollos.

It wasn't just that they had a favorite teacher, they made their tribe look good by making the other tribe look bad. In essence, their problem was pride. Pride was at the root of their destructive divisions.

And the cure Paul prescribes for all this unbridled judging is this, “*learn... not to think beyond what is written...*” Realize, the boundaries of your judging - if it's not in God's written Word - if you can't point to chapter and verse - *if it's just a question of style, or opinion, or taste, or tradition* - then stop judging! **Just because you don't like it, doesn't make it wrong.**

He says in verse 7, “*For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*” All the Corinthians possessed they had received by God's grace. Why are they now taking pride in blessings that came as a gift.

It reminds me of the pastor who asked his friend, “*Will you pray that I stay humble?*” His friend replied, “*First, tell me, what do you have to be proud about?*” The answer for us all is zilch. All we have is God's gift.

In the next verse Paul reeks with sarcasm. And I'm sure it angered the Corinthians when they first read his words. Paul mocks the arrogant believers of Corinth, “*You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us - and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!*”

The Corinthians were acting like royalty. They were flaunting their privileges in Christ; while ignoring the responsibilities that came with those privileges.

“*For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.*” The word “*spectacle*” was well known to Roman citizens. The Emperor ruled the populace by keeping their *stomachs full* and their *minds entertained*. “*Bread and circuses*” was the Caesar's formula.

And the various forms of Roman entertainment were known as “*spectacles.*” Amphitheaters were built to host athletic competitions. Chariot races were held in Rome's Circus Maximus - the Talladega of the day. At times the Coliseum in Rome was flooded to stage mock naval battles. Gladiators fought to the death on its normally dusty floor. A favorite, bloody headliner in the Roman Coliseum was to toss Christian leaders to the hungry lions. It all fed Rome's thirst for “*spectacle.*”

Paul is saying that while the Corinthians are passing frivolous judgments on each other, and causing dissension - there are other believers in the Church who have

been made a *“spectacle to the world”* - who are paying a steep price to follow their Lord Jesus.

The prideful Corinthians were acting carnal; while men and angels were focused on the apostles who were being abused by the Roman as *“spectacles.”*

In verse 10 Paul speaks sarcastically. He contrasts the persecuted apostles with the prideful Corinthians. *“We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!* He says this tongue-in-cheek, *how did the mighty Corinthians become so wise, so strong, so honorable in their own estimation - while the apostles who sacrificed their very lives for Jesus’ sake - appear as fools?* Could it be the Corinthians were judging success by worldly criteria?

In the movie, *“Field of Dreams,”* an Iowa farmer hears a voice in his cornfield tell him to plow under his crop and build a baseball diamond. He builds it, and shadowy men from a bygone era play ball on his field. Of course, the farmer’s extended family thinks he’s a certifiable nut. No one trusts his actions. They think he’s being reckless. Everybody calls the man a fool.

But as a Christian I also hear voices! I base life-altering decisions on a voice nobody else hears. I’ve even taken economic risk to follow that voice. And as a result, I’ve seen God in action when few others saw Him. Am I ready to be seen by other people the way the farmer’s neighbors saw him?... a *“fool for Christ?”*

The Corinthians were proud. They **cares** about how other men saw them. They wanted to appear wise, and strong, and honorable. In contrast, Paul could **care less** about his image. He was a *“fool”* for Jesus’ sake!

Verse 11, *“To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless.”* A steward's job is not to be rich and comfortable, but **faithful** - even if it requires suffering.

“And we labor, working with our own hands.” In Corinth, Paul met a couple, *“Aquila and Priscilla”* - fellow tent-makers. Together they went into business. Paul worked a secular job to support his ministry.

He continues listing the sacrifices he made for the sake of his ministry, *“Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat.”*

Paul was certainly a fighter. He never rolled over. He always struck back... But it was the way Paul fought. He responded to personal attacks with blessing - he resisted opposition with perseverance - and when he was falsely accused he retaliated with the truth...

Paul says, *“We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.”* Literally, he’s saying, *“we’re treated like the scum of the earth.”*

This is how erroneous human judgments can be. The people God crowns, the world clubs. Folks who are honored in heaven, are often mistreated on earth.

Verse 14, "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." Paul was grieved that the Corinthians had listened to his critics. They didn't trust him, yet Paul was the man who led them to Christ. In essence, he was their spiritual father.

He tells the Corinthians they'll have 10,000 teachers in their lifetime, but only one father... And this is true of you as well. *The pastor or friend who led you to Christ, the church where you were saved* - will always have a special place in your heart. You'll enjoy other churches and teachers, but you only have one spiritual parent.

And this made the Corinthians' doubts of Paul all the more painful to him. *He felt personally betrayed.* One of the first lessons you learn when it comes to ministry is that **love always flows downward.** We don't love our parents, as much as our parents love us. Our children won't love us, as much as we love our children. Love is like water. It always flows downward.

And the same is true spiritually. Just because you love and invest in someone else's life, doesn't mean they'll return the favor. The people you serve will probably never love you as much as you love them.

Paul tells the Corinthians in verse 16, "Therefore I urge you, imitate me." Paul is not like the parent who tells his teenagers, "do as I say, not as I do..." Don't think for a second your kids won't see through that kind of hypocrisy. *Paul sought to be a leader by example!*

"For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord..." Not all of Paul's love had gone unreciprocated. A young man named Timothy, had been his "faithful son in the Lord."

"Who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church." Timothy delivered this letter to the Corinthians. He was Paul's representative.

"Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you." Paul's critics had the attitude, "while the cat is away the mice will play." Paul issues a warning. He's coming to Corinth to set things straight!

Verse 19, "But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power." When Paul arrives in Corinth he'll come with more than words, but power. I'm not sure exactly what he means, but it sounds like when he arrives Paul is prepared to cram a little humble pie down some haughty Corinthian throats, if need be.

When Paul hits town he's going to demand an accounting of the church's attitudes and accusations.

Yet, Paul wants his return to Corinth to be a happy reunion... The chapter closes, "What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?" It's their choice. Paul's approach to the Corinthians will depend on their attitude toward him.

When my boys were little tikes, and intent on misbehaving, all I had to do to get their attention was to take off my belt, and lay it over the door to their room.

When the belt came off, words were no longer necessary. **And here, Paul is taking off his belt.** Do the Corinthians want him to come with a rod or in love?

Let me close with a line from a country song, “[Sometimes you’re the windshield. Sometimes you’re the bug.](#)” Paul isn’t threatening them, he’s just telling... *They’ll be the bug, if they don’t stop bugging him.*