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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

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JESUS WILL BUILD HIS CHURCH ACTS 18:1-17 & 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-3

INTRODUCTION

Today I will begin a series of messages from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church. The primary reason for this series of messages is our need to discover what it means to be genuinely spiritual as the Bible describes spirituality. There is much passing for spirituality today, even among us, which stands in contradiction to God's word. Therefore, we need to hear the Holy Spirit speak through the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian Church. We need to hear him as a pastor who loves his congregation as he instructs them to move toward maturity in their faith and to move away from false spirituality. To properly grasp the meaning of this letter, we should be familiar with at least a few details of the city, its people and how God began to work in Corinth to call out a people for Himself.

1. THE CITY OF CORINTH

Corinth was one of the great sea ports of ancient Greece. Because it had a harbor on the east and another on the west, the city was a bustling trading center. Since the trip around the southern tip of Greece was a hazardous two hundred miles, most merchants chose to unload their goods at one of the Corinthian ports. The freight was then carried across the isthmus and reloaded at the other Corinthian port. Corinth was destroyed a couple of times by earthquakes and foreign invaders, but Julius Caesar had it rebuilt about 44 BC. Being a Roman city, Corinth was populated by about 700,000 people and approximately 2/3 of these were freedmen (slaves who had earned their freedom) and slaves. Historically, Corinth was known for its prosperity and its wickedness. It was a center for religion, philosophy, art and vice. Gordon Fee writes, *All this evidence suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.*

2. THE PEOPLE OF CORINTH

Corinth was typical of a large city in that it was composed of many kinds of people. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul emphasizes their diversity when he writes, *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.* The people of Corinth had a reputation for enjoying their sin, particularly sexual immorality. The church in Corinth struggled to free itself from such sin. Paul was not disillusioned concerning the kind of people who comprised the church because he knew their pasts. He says, *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 Corinthians 6:9-11a).*

In fact, it was their continual struggle with sin that led Paul to write this letter. Paul writes 1 Corinthians for a reason; to clarify what genuine spirituality really is. The church claimed to be wise and spiritual, yet only 3 years after its founding, Paul received reports (1:11; 5:1; 11:18) and a letter (7:1) explaining the church's moral and spiritual failures. Gordon Fee notes that 1 Corinthians addresses *at least eleven different, somewhat desperate concerns, ten of which are behavioral*. In short, the people who formed the church had departed from the truth Paul had taught them. It seems that when Paul left, some new leaders from among the congregation had risen to a position of influence and led the church astray (15:12; 4:18). Specifically, they questioned Paul's authority as an apostle and they misrepresented the gospel.

3. THE PURPOSE OF GOD IN CORINTH WAS TO BUILD HIS CHURCH

Jesus came to reconcile sinners to God. The Corinthians were certainly good candidates for this reconciliation. It is the revealed purpose of God to display His great mercy by saving such sinners from His wrath. It is the good pleasure of God to reconcile such sinners to Himself through the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 1:1-12). So now the question becomes, how did God bring such wicked sinners into a right relationship to Himself?

(3.1) God sent His messengers to Corinth

Acts 18 records how God used Paul and others to found the church in Corinth. Paul ministered in Corinth for about 18 months because God's purpose was to preach the gospel there. No one can be reconciled to God apart from hearing the gospel (Romans 10:14-17). God chose Paul to be His messenger in Corinth (Acts 18:1). It was there that Paul met a Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3). Paul's custom was to offer the gospel to the Jews first so he often preached in their synagogues (Acts 18:4-5). God also sent Silas and Timothy to join Paul in this ministry (Acts 18:5). In response to Paul's preaching, the Jews resisted and blasphemed (Acts 18:6) so Paul then took the gospel to the Gentiles. One of the early converts was a Gentile named Titius Justus (Acts 18:7). Shortly following this, Crispus, the leader of the local synagogue, was converted along with his family (Acts 18:8). This seems to have caused quite a stir among the Corinthians and Paul begins to fear persecution. The Lord reassures Paul that he must go on preaching because (1) God will protect him and (2) God has many of His elect in Corinth who will believe upon hearing the gospel (Acts 18:9-10).

(3.2) God called sinners to faith and overcame their resistance

Much of what I have taught you is the historical record concerning Paul's ministry in Corinth. A church was established there and many sinners were reconciled to God. There is one critical theological issue we should consider when we observe how God builds a church. God gathers His people through a supernatural calling which overcomes their natural resistance to the gospel and enables them to repent and believe. This idea of *calling* plays a prominent role in 1 Corinthians and through out the Scriptures.

In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul refers to the believing Corinthians as *those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling*. They were saints because God had effectually called them to faith in Christ. Their response to His calling was the evidence of their election or their having been set apart in Christ Jesus. How do we know if we are the elect of God? How do we know if we are the recipients of this covenant love? We know because God calls us from our spiritual deadness into spiritual life which leads to us making a real and crucial decision to repent of unbelief and believe in the Lord Jesus. Let's think about 3 aspects of this call:

(1) God is the one who calls.

1 Corinthians 1:9 says *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*. If we are to be reconciled to God, then He must first call us into a proper relationship with Himself. God calls and the purpose of His call is to put you into fellowship with His Son. There is a sense in which I call you as a preacher of the gospel. But that is not the call in view here. As Paul's ministry in Corinth demonstrated, the preacher's call alone cannot save. God must call you into spiritual life.

(2) God's inward call is a special act of grace toward His chosen people.

In Acts 18:9-10, God assures Paul that he must go on preaching because *I have many people in this city*. These are those whom God chose to save before He created the world and upon hearing the outward call of Paul's preaching, they would receive an inward call that would bring them to saving faith. Many heard Paul's outward call, but only God's elect received the decisive inward call of God's Spirit.

(3) God's call is effective in producing spiritual life.

The call of God to salvation is also the means that God uses to empower us to repent and believe. The call of God does not invite us to come to Christ, it is a powerful call that awakens spiritual life within us and compels us to come. As a result of this powerful call, we now see the truth and desire Jesus. This leads to our repentance and faith. The call of God takes away our pride and rebellion and makes Christ irresistibly attractive so that we willingly repent and believe.

This truth is seen clearly in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. *3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. 6For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, we find 2 powerful forces at work against us. First of all, there is our own rebellion and unbelief. Secondly, there is Satan who intensifies our hatred of the truth and the result is our absolute inability to see the truth of the gospel. So what happened? We heard the outward call for salvation as Christ was preached (v5). And then the same God who called light out of darkness in creation (Genesis 1), called us to see the light of the gospel. We were blind in verse 4, but because of the effective call of God working through the preaching of the gospel, we now see the love and light of the good news of Jesus. Once the call of God produces spiritual life we willingly repent and believe and are gloriously brought into the family of God.

CONCLUSION

God's grace is evident today because each of us is here to hear the outward call of the gospel. God is obviously at work in ways that we can see and hear. And God is at work in ways that we cannot see, nor hear. By faith we accept that where the Word and Spirit are present, spiritual life will result. The pleasures of sin will no longer trump the pleasures of God and we will gladly repent and believe. We cannot hear this inward call with our physical ears, but we see its fruit in lives gradually conforming to the law of God and the way of Christ.