

Introduction

In August 1974 I was in Duncan, Oklahoma for the Elks Labor Day Golf Tournament. I was pretty excited about playing in the tournament, and I couldn't get to sleep. There was a daily devotional and a Gideon's Bible in the drawer by the bed, and I began to read the devotional. The second devotional was about the peace of God, and it said that God can give peace so that people can sleep, which was something that was appealing to me at that moment. Over the past year a seminary student had been sharing the gospel with me, and I had been asking God to reveal that He was real, and He had done that. I had seen the love of Christ in the man that had been sharing with me. That devotional at the Chisholm Trail Hotel that night was the gentle prodding that I needed, and I got on my knees in that hotel room and prayed to receive Christ. The one immediate result was that I did receive the peace of God, and I fell right to sleep. People often commented on how much peace I have, and because of that frequent observation, I wrote a gospel tract about peace. My life did not immediately change. I continued to live like an unbeliever. My thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions did not immediately and automatically change. My heart towards God changed, and I knew that I now belonged to Him, but my lifestyle had not changed. In the summer of 1975, I was at summer school, and God put a man named Jim in the room next to mine. Jim and his girlfriend, Connie, were heavily involved in Campus Crusade for Christ. We became friends and he shared with me some principles of growth. It was all new to me, and I listened with great interest. He told me that I needed to start reading the Bible, so I started reading Proverbs. He had not told me where to start reading, and did not put me on a Bible reading program. I just happened to open up to Proverbs and began reading. I fell in love with Proverbs, and read eight chapters a day. I would read chapters one through eight, and then the next day, two through nine. Jim also encouraged me to start going to the weekly Campus Crusade meetings on Wednesday nights. I started going to those and received solid teaching about forgiveness, fellowship, evangelism, and many other topics. I also enjoyed the fellowship and worship with the other believers. I also started going to McKinney Bible Church, and learned a lot from Pastor Paul Young. The end result of reading the Word of God, being taught the word of God, and fellowshiping with other believers was that my life began to change. My thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions all began to be transformed.

Our passage today is not about how to grow as a believer, but the characteristics of baby Christians, who are immature in Christ. Paul gives two primary characteristics; their food and their flesh. Immature or baby Christians must be fed milk because they cannot handle solid food. Second, carnal believers are fleshly, and their walk is worldly. Paul's letter to the Corinthians could have been addressed to me, as these characteristics would have applied to my life. I was not in the word of God, and could not eat solid food, and my life was no different than the unbelievers around me. I walked like mere men instead of a son of God.

(1 Cor 3:1-4) "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. {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, {3} for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? {4} For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?"

Characteristics of Spiritual Immaturity

1. Food for infants
2. Fleshly lifestyle

1. Food for infants

Paul, begins by saying that he could not speak to the Corinthians as spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. He is describing two characteristics; they are fleshly or carnal men, and they are infants in Christ, or immature. Paul said that he gave them milk to drink, not solid food, for they were not yet able to receive it. The first characteristic of an immature believer is that he does not eat solid food.

(1 Cor 3:1–2) “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. {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,”

Even though this is a hard word that Paul is writing to them, he said it in a loving way. He first addressed them as brethren. He did not speak down at them, but spoke to them as equals, as a brother in Christ. Paul is giving them a word of correction from a humble heart.

In Hebrews 5, the writer, who may have been Paul, wrote that by this time they ought to be teachers, but instead, they were needing to be taught the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and needed milk, not solid food. He said that those who partake only of milk are not accustomed to the word of righteousness, because they are infants. He said that solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

(Heb 5:11–14) Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. {12} For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. {13} For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. {14} But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

Karen and I had ten children of our own, and we also picked up two foster children when they were two days old. We know from first-hand experience that babies need milk, but when they reach about five or six months of age, they can begin having some baby food. That does not mean that they are eating steak at five months. They can begin eating apple sauce, and other soft foods that have been put through a blender. New foods are gradually introduced to them over the next year. As their back teeth come in, they are able to eat even more foods.

Our spiritual lives are very similar. A baby Christian must be taught the **elementary** or foundational principles of the oracles of God. The Greek word for elementary that is used here is arche (Strong’s G746), which means a commencement or beginning. It also means chief in order, time, place or rank. It can also mean power, principality, principle or rule. These teachings are a beginner level, or a primary teaching. They are some of the first teachings that people need to have in their walk with the Lord.

These teachings are elementary **principles**. The word principle in the Greek is stoicheion (Strong’s G4747), which means something orderly in arrangement. It comes from stoicheo, which means to march in military rank. “This word was used in classical Greek in the sense of “walking in line” and “being in rows.” The word came to mean that of “walking in line” by means of the words of God.” These elementary teachings bring order and arrangement in our lives. They are given to help us in our walk with the Lord.

What are those elementary things? In Hebrews 6, we are given these six elementary or foundational teachings: 1) Repentance from dead works, 2) Faith towards God, 3) Instruction about washings (baptisms), 4) Laying on of hands, 5) Resurrection of the dead, 6) Eternal judgment.

(Heb 6:1-2) “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, {2} of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”

As a younger pastor, I was looking at these elementary teachings that need to be in place in our lives. I asked myself how well I understood each of these, and whether I could effectively teach these to others, or whether I too needed to be taught these principles by others. I was not satisfied with my answer, so I began to study these six principles. My study ended up in a book that I wrote on these six elementary teachings. We began to teach these principles to all new members of our church. I found that not many people had ever been taught these six principles. Then, I discovered that most of the pastors that I knew did not have a good handle on these six foundational teachings. We have a need in our churches to learn these elementary and foundational teachings so we can move on to more solid food. God wanted me to mature, and He wants His church to mature. Hebrews tells us to leave or move beyond these elementary and to press on to maturity. It is as if we cannot go on to maturity without having these foundational principles in our life. We must have a good understanding of these foundational and elementary teachings.

Finally, the writer in Hebrews goes on to say that he doesn't want to lay again a foundation of repentance from dead works, faith toward God, instruction about washings, laying of of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. The Greek word for foundation is themelios (themelios, G2310), which means something put down, a substructure, foundation. The doctrine of repentance and the other five teachings are foundational teachings. These teachings need to be taught to all believers so that they can build upon. Without good foundations, any construction that is done is suspect at best. We must have proper foundations laid in people's lives if we want people to grow and mature in Christ.

Many years ago, I did a series of messages on spiritual maturity. Many of the teachings were on the word of God. I did a message on reading the word. I did another on meditating on the word. I did a third message on memorizing the word. I did another on studying the word of God. I wanted our church to learn to eat solid food, and to train their senses. I did not want God saying to us, “by this time many of you ought to be teachers...”

There are many different ways of studying the Bible. Rick Warren published a book a few years ago that gave twelve different study methods. The Inductive Bible Study method is an excellent one. In it, you record your observations, interpretations, and applications I like to preach expository messages, and I use a subject/complement method. I look for the subject or main idea of a passage, and then the compliments, which is what the passage says about the main idea. I combine word studies, inductive Bible study, and other methods into my study time. Many people do not know the Bible study resources and tools that are readily available, such as the Strong's Hebrew Greek Concordance. That is one tool that everyone should learn how to use. I believe that learning how to study the word of God is extremely important in our growth and maturity as a believer.

The church in Corinth did not have a grasp on these elementary teachings. They still needed milk to drink, not solid food. Paul's letter to them was going to address their need for repentance, which is the first of the six foundational teachings. I believe that Paul had taught them these elementary teachings when he planted the church, but they had forgotten them, or had neglected them. I know that I forget things, and need reminders. We need to learn these elementary teachings, and we also need to review them from time to time. We also need to make the study of God's word a habit in our lives, so that we are regularly eating solid food.

2. Fleshly lifestyle

Paul did not address the Corinthians as spiritual men, but men of flesh. They were not walking in the Spirit, but were walking in the flesh. They were carnal Christians. The word carnal means fleshly (Latin – carnalis, flesh). Merriam Webster defines carnal as a) relating to or given to crude bodily pleasures and appetites, b) marked by sexuality. Paul gives three examples of fleshly behavior, saying, “for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul, and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not mere men?” Paul addresses the sexual immorality in chapter five, but the context of the first four chapters is division, which was caused by their fleshly lifestyle. They were jealous of one another, full of strife, and divisive.

(1 Cor 3:1–4) “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. {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, {3} for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? {4} For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men?”

Paul just gave three examples of a fleshly lifestyle. In his letter to the Galatians Paul expounded on what it means to walk in the flesh. Look at all the things Paul includes in that list. “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...” And things like these means that even this list is not a comprehensive list of the deeds of the flesh. The Corinthians were living fleshly lives, not spiritual lives, and all of these deeds of the flesh were characteristics of their lives. If Paul were writing to the church in Rome, Ga, or whatever city that you are in, what would he characterize your lifestyle as? Would he say that our church is fleshly, or would he address us as spiritual men?

(Gal 5:19-21) “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, {20} idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, {21} envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”

Paul did not just give them a list of the deeds of the flesh, he gave them some practical solutions so that they could stop walking in the flesh and start walking in the Spirit. Let's take a look at some of these applications. Paul starts by giving them a vision. He said that God called them to freedom, and that they were not to turn their freedom into an opportunity for the flesh. God has called all of us to freedom, freedom from sin. Many feel in bondage to sin, but God has called us to freedom.

(Gal 5:13) “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

Paul’s second solution was to serve one another through love. Most fleshly behavior is about pursuing our own selfish desires. God wants us to get our focus off of fulfilling our own desires, and helping other people with their needs. Serving others is a fitting prescription for selfishness.

Paul’s third solution was to walk by the Spirit. He said if we walk by the Spirit, we will not carry out the desire of the flesh, as the flesh and the Spirit are set against each other. Then, Paul gives the fruit of the Spirit. When we walk in the Spirit, we will bear the fruit of the Spirit. For us to walk in love, joy, peace, and patience, we must walk in the Spirit and be led by the Spirit.

(Gal 5:16-24) “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. {17} For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.... {22} But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, {23} gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

How do we walk in the Spirit? How are we led by the Spirit? I believe that we have to be filled with the Spirit and set our minds on the things of the Spirit. In Ephesians 5:18-20, Paul wrote that we are not to be drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but we are to be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with our hearts to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things. If we are going to be filled and led by the Spirit, we must be worshipers of God. We have to be singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We have to be a grateful people, giving thanks to God for all things. Paul also mentioned that we need to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Being subject to one another requires humility. Walking in the Spirit requires humility and a fear of the Lord.

(Eph 5:18–21) “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, {19} speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; {20} always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; {21} and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”

Similarly, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he told them to keep seeking the things above, and to set their minds on things above, not on things that are on earth. Walking in the Spirit requires us to set our minds on spiritual things, not on the things of the earth, which are temporal.

(Col 3:1–3) “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. {2} Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. {3} For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Paul gave one final thought about walking in the Spirit and not in the flesh. He said that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Baptism is a picture of us being buried with Christ, and being raised up to a new resurrected life. The new life comes after we have been crucified with Him. Most of us need to remind ourselves of this.

(Gal 5:24) “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Conclusion and Applications

Paul told the Corinthians that he could not address them as spiritual men, but as men of flesh, babes in Christ. They had to be fed milk to drink, not solid food, and they were living fleshly or carnal lives. He gave examples of their fleshly behavior, jealousy and strife. They were a divided church, with some claiming to be of Paul, and others claiming to be of Apollos. They were acting like mere men, not sons of God. Spiritually mature men and women would not be living fleshly lives, full of strife, jealousy, and immorality. Paul is indirectly encouraging them to grow up.

In closing, I would like to look at the other side. What are the characteristics of spirit-led believers who are spiritually mature? I believe the first characteristic would be their food. Mature believers will be eating solid food. They will have trained their senses and will be men and women of the word. They will not just be hearers of the word, but they will be doers of the word. They will be reading the word, meditating on the word, studying the word, and because of practice their senses will be able to discern good and evil. Spiritually mature believers will not just be feeding themselves, but they will be feeding and teaching others.

The most common excuse that I hear from people is that they do not have the gift of teaching; therefore, they don't study the Bible. I believe that whether we have the gift of teaching or not, we need to be in God's word. I may not have the gift of giving, but I am to honor the Lord with my first fruits. I may not have the gift of helps, but I am called to help others. I may not have the gift of serving, but all of us are called to serve one another. In the same way, we are not all teachers, but we all need to be reading, meditating, and studying the word of God. You don't have to prepare sermons for Sunday morning, or for small group, but your study will personally benefit you. Spiritually mature believers will be able to enjoy solid food, not just milk.

A spiritually mature believer will also reflect Christ. He will not be walking in the flesh, but will be walking in the Spirit. A spiritually mature believer will have crucified his flesh, and will be living a resurrected life. He will be worshiping God and giving thanks to God. He will be setting his mind on things above, not on things that are on the earth. He will be living a life of humble submission to others.

One last characteristic of a spiritually mature believer is out of 1 John 2:12-17. John gives the stages of maturity for believers. He starts with little children, and they know that their sins are forgiven. In verse thirteen, he said that children also know the Father. We cannot be His children unless we know Him. When we receive Christ, we are born again. We are born into the family of God, and we become part of the family of God. A little child may not know the word, and may not be able to teach a small group, but they have come into a relationship with Christ.

(1 John 2:12-14) "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. {13} I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. {14} I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."

The characteristics of young men is that the word of God abides in them; they are strong; and they have overcome the evil one. Young Christians have begun this maturation process. They

have spent time in the Word and the word of God abides in them. They have become strong, and they have learned spiritual warfare, and have overcome the evil one.

Finally, John gives the characteristics of fathers, or mature believers. Mature believers know the Lord; they know Him who has been from the beginning. John tells us this in verse thirteen, and then repeats it in verse fourteen. Spiritually mature believers really know the Father. They have spent time with the Lord, and in His word. They have spent time in prayer, conversing with the Father. They have spent time worshipping the Lord, and giving Him thanks. They know the Father's will and they know the Father's ways. They know the Father who has been from the beginning.

A spiritual assessment only lets you know where you stand; it does not change or mature you. God is the One that began a good work in us, and it is God who will complete it. Our part in the process is to present our lives to Him as living sacrifices, and to seek God with all of our heart, and to get to know the Father. Our part is to abide in Christ, and in His word.

Where are you this morning in your relationship with the Lord? Do you have a relationship with Christ? Have you received Christ into your life and made Him your Lord? If not, and you would like to have a relationship with God, then you can begin this journey today. God said that we are saved by faith, not by works. There is nothing you can do to earn your way to heaven. God requires faith. We must believe that Jesus is the Son of God who came and died for our sins, and who was raised from the dead. Second, we must confess Jesus as Lord, allowing Him to lead and direct our lives. If you believe and want to receive Christ, pray with me.

Lord Jesus, I believe that You came and died for our sins, and were raised from the dead by the Father. I ask You to forgive me of my sins, and to come into my life. I confess You as Lord of my life, and I submit my life to You. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you prayed that this morning, the Lord has come into your life and you are now part of the family of God. You have started a wonderful and exciting journey with Him. I encourage you to share with me and others what you have done, so we can help you get started on this journey.

There are others this morning that know that you are a believer. The Holy Spirit may have been speaking to you about where you are in your growth as a believer. I encourage you to take a minute to write down what the Spirit is telling you, and the things that He is encouraging you to do.

Prayer

Father God, we want to be a church that knows You. We want to be a church that is getting to know You better every day. We want to be a church that You can address as spiritual men, not babes in Christ. Help us to learn to study Your word and eat solid food. Help us to become teachers, not just those who must be fed by others. Holy Spirit, we ask You to fill us afresh this morning. We ask You to lead us, and to help us walk in the Spirit. Help us to set our minds on things above, and on the Spirit. Lord, we repent of selfish and fleshly behavior. Help us learn to serve others, and to be peacemakers. Lord, help us to properly re-present You to those around us. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction (1 Cor 3:1-4)

1. Food for infants (1 Cor 3:1-2, Heb 5:11-14, Heb 6:1-2)

2. Fleshly lifestyle (1 Cor 3:1-4, Gal 5:13, 16-24, Eph 5:18-21, Col 3:1-3)

Conclusion and Applications (1 Cor 3:1-4, 1 John 2:12-14, Rom 10:9-10)