

1 Corinthians 3A (2013)

- Every decision we make in our life, every priority we set, every action we take carries a consequence
 - Sometimes those consequences are good for us
 - When we make a decision to accept Christ, good things follow obviously
 - When we prioritize expenses in our budget or activities in our schedule, we may be rewarded with greater security or increased contentment
 - When we take the proper course of action at work or in school, we are likely to be recognized for our diligence and judgment
 - But sometimes the consequences of our decisions will be negative

A little guy is sitting at the bar just staring at his drink for half an hour when this big trouble-making biker steps next to him, grabs his drink and gulps it down in one swig. The poor little guy starts crying.

"Come on man. I was just giving you a hard time," the biker says. "I can't stand to see a man crying."

"This is the worst day of my life," says the little guy between sobs. "I can't do anything right. I overslept and was late to an important meeting, so my boss fired me. When I went to the parking lot, I found my car was stolen and I don't have any insurance. I grabbed a cab home but, after the cab left, I discovered my wallet was still in the cab. At home I found my wife cheating with the gardener and my dog bit me. So I came to this bar trying to work up the courage to put an end to my life, and then you show up and drink the poison!"

- But sometimes the consequences of our decisions will be negative
 - When we set the wrong priorities, when we make bad judgments, when we ignore the wise counsel of others, we may suffer in some way
 - We know the Lord is patient with His children
 - We know He frequently rescues us from the consequences of our mistakes

- And He always forgives by our faith in Christ
- But just because the Lord is merciful and forgiving doesn't mean we won't see consequences – eternal consequences for our earthly decisions
 - On the contrary, the Bible teaches there are eternal consequences for choices and actions that displease our Lord
 - For going against His commandments
 - Our salvation based on faith alone is never in jeopardy
 - But there is a whole lot more to a relationship with the Lord than merely the question of our eternal destiny
 - The question every Christian must consider is when we appear before the Lord, what will He say about how we served Him in the time He gave us?
- It's clear enough from this letter that the Corinthian church was not focused on this question
 - They were preoccupied with earthly achievement, earthly appearances, earthly approval – and as we will see in coming chapters – earthly pleasure
 - We already know they fought over who had greater honor in the church on the basis of who baptized or converted them
 - They took pride in their following Christ, though Paul says it had nothing to do with human wisdom
 - Meanwhile, Paul says they had overlooked the fact that their mentors were themselves weak and unimpressive men
 - These kinds of behaviors are indications of spiritual immaturity, of living in the flesh rather than in resting on the counsel of the Spirit
 - Last week Paul told the church they had access to everything they needed for a godly life
 - They had access to the mind of God, to marvelous mysteries of the faith
 - But they had to make use of that wisdom
 - They had to make use of what God has provided

- Now Paul moves into a discussion of the consequences of their immaturity, both now and in the future moment of their eternal judgment
 - We pick up again in Paul's letter near the end of the second chapter

[1Cor. 2:12](#) Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,
[1Cor. 2:13](#) which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

- In the first part of Chapter 2, Paul explained his success in spreading the Gospel was a result of God's power, not his own power
 - The source of that power was the Spirit of God, Who indwells every believer
 - The Spirit gave Paul the words to use and the Spirit gave the Corinthian church the wisdom to respond
 - In fact, we all have the Spirit so that we may know the wisdom God is freely willing to share with us
 - Now Paul wants the church to understand the difference between living by the Lord's Spirit and living in the flesh
 - In v.12 Paul says the Spirit we received when we came to faith is fundamentally different than the nature or spirit of the unbelieving world
 - There is a Spirit of God, and there is a spirit of the world
 - Everyone begins life as an unbeliever, so we who are believers once relied on the world's spirit
- What is this spirit of the world Paul is describing?
 - First, it's a reference to the nature or spirit we inherited at birth
 - Human beings are both flesh and spirit
 - The flesh is a container for the spirit
 - While the container is temporary and one day passes away
 - The spirit of a man is eternal and exists forever

- Among other things the Bible teaches us, the dead spirit we received at birth is incapable of pleasing God or following God's commands

[Rom. 8:7](#) because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does **not** subject itself to the law of God, for it is **not even able** to do so,

- It is a spirit that lives for itself and cannot please God
 - Paul will explain this in far greater detail near the very end of this letter
- Secondly, the spirit of the world is a spirit under the control of the enemy, Satan, who is temporarily the power of this world
 - The unbelieving world is a world of fleshly people with spirits that can be manipulated and directed by Satan
 - Paul says in Ephesians

[Eph. 2:1](#) And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
[Eph. 2:2](#) in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

[Eph. 2:3](#) Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

- Before we were saved by God's grace, we lived as men and women dead to the truth of God and the Gospel
 - We lived according to the course of the world
 - We lived according to Satan's authority, the spirit working in the world
- The spirit of unbelievers is subject to Satan through a fear of death, the Bible says

[Heb. 2:14](#) Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,
[Heb. 2:15](#) and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

- Believers are motivated by their knowledge and fear of God
- But unbelievers are motivated by a fear death, which the Bible calls a slavery to the devil
- The Corinthian church were believers, of course, so they had the Spirit
 - So Paul says the church's understanding didn't rest on Paul's wisdom
 - It was the Spirit's wisdom that Paul delivered
 - And it was the Spirit that taught them to understand what Paul said
 - That's why Paul says he spoke spiritual words combined with spiritual thoughts
 - He means that while the Spirit was working in him to deliver spiritual words, the Spirit was working in them to grant understanding
 - The effect is like transmitting a radio signal on a frequency that only a believer can receive
 - So the church can't credit Paul with having wise words, and it can't credit itself with having wisdom to understand the message
 - Paul was a vessel and they were vessels
 - The Lord was the sender of the message, the Father was the Author of the message, and the Spirit was the receiver of the message
 - So no man may boast
 - But the unbelieving world can't tune into this frequency apart from the Spirit's power

1Cor. 2:14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

1Cor. 2:15 But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.

1Cor. 2:16 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

- Paul uses the term “natural” to describe an unbeliever, because every person is born an unbeliever, and in that sense the natural state of man is to be an unbeliever
 - A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit
 - What does it mean that an unbeliever cannot accept the things of the Spirit?
 - The things of the Spirit is the wisdom of God
 - Chief among them is the Gospel itself
 - The Gospel is a spiritual truth, spiritual wisdom
 - The natural man cannot accept the truth of the Gospel, as Paul explained in Chapter 1
 - He cannot understand them because they can only be appraised or investigated spiritually
 - Let’s use a simple analogy to illustrate what Paul is saying
 - A person raised in an English-speaking home learns English naturally; it is their natural state
 - It’s the only language they know, so in order to communicate with such a person, you must speak in English
 - Now imagine that one day this English-speaking person walks into an elevator with two other people
 - As the three ride up in the elevator, the two strangers begin speaking to one another in Swedish
 - Our English-speaking person hears the words being spoken, but they make no sense to him whatsoever
 - In fact, the language is so different and so foreign to his ears, it makes him smile a little just to hear the strange sounds
 - Their speech is foolishness to him, and he cannot understand it because it is not his natural language
 - But now let’s imagine the English-speaking person entered the elevator with a friend who understood Swedish

- When the other two people began speaking Swedish, the English-speaking guy can turn to his buddy and ask him to translate what was being said in the elevator
- Now the foolish sounding words suddenly become understandable and sensible
- The interpreter turned foolishness into wisdom
- Now let's change the situation...instead of three people speaking different human languages, now we have an unbeliever entering an elevator with two believers
 - This time the two believers begin to talk about their shared faith
 - They talk of their appreciation for God's grace and their desire to please Him prior to their judgment day
 - They discuss their joy at using their spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ
 - They note the hope they share in knowing that their body will one day be replaced and yet they want to glorify the Lord in the days that remain
 - What would our unbeliever in that elevator think?
 - Paul says it would be as if the two believers were speaking Swedish
 - The unbeliever understands the words, but the meaning and significance is lost upon him
 - The whole conversation sounds foolish
 - That's Paul's point
 - Only when the Lord is ready to bring the natural man to an understanding of spiritual things will he understand such a conversation
 - The Lord must first send His Spirit to that person as an "interpreter" of spiritual truth
 - Like the buddy in the elevator, the Spirit explains the meaning of spiritual things to the unbeliever, leading him to faith

- In the moment the Gospel is presented, the Spirit must be present to impress upon the unbeliever the truth of the message
 - And by that work of the Spirit, the person believes and then continues to grow in spiritual wisdom
 - That's why Paul says at the end of v.14 that the truths of God can only be spiritually appraised
 - The word appraised in Greek means examined, investigated
 - We need the Spirit in us to explain to us the things of God
 - Otherwise, we cannot understand them
- Furthermore, in vs. 15-16 Paul says our transition from natural to spiritual is so complete, that afterward we have no need for another to reveal spiritual truth
 - Paul says the believer is not appraised by anyone
 - He means that no one can come to a believer indwelt by the Spirit and offer him additional spiritual truth
 - We're not saying that we don't benefit from teaching and teachers
 - Paul himself says elsewhere in Ephesians that the church has been given teachers so that we might be matured for the work of ministry
 - No man is an island and we all need teachers to move us forward in our walk of faith
 - But there is no source of spiritual knowledge in the world that can compete with what the Spirit offers
 - As Paul quotes from Isaiah 40:13 who can teach God anything He doesn't already know?
 - Therefore, if we have the mind of God in the Spirit living in us, why do we need to go to the world for spiritual answers?
 - We only need to rely on the Spirit of God to teach us according to the word of God
- Paul has now delivered a defense of the truth and corrected the Corinthians on their improper thinking and prideful associations

- But even so, there is still a need for rebuke
 - These believers are making wrong choices and setting wrong priorities in their walk
 - So Paul is now going to instruct them on the consequences they face if they continue in their worldly ways

1Cor. 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

1Cor. 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,

1Cor. 3:3 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?

1Cor. 3:4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?

- Paul could not speak to this church as to spiritual men
 - Paul says this church was not ready to receive the spiritual wisdom God has freely prepared for believers indwelt by the Spirit
 - Because they were still living in an infantile state of spiritual maturity
 - Paul begins to explain that though we have access to the mind of God, that wisdom doesn't flow into our brain all at once
 - It is made available over time in a process of maturing
 - Though the Corinthians church had the Spirit, nevertheless they weren't making the most of His help
 - So Paul calls them spiritual infants
 - Infants by necessity must live on milk, not solid food
 - Milk is the only kind of food an infant can digest
 - Any attempt to feed them solid food would do more harm than good
 - They would choke on it
 - But at some point a diet of only milk is equally dangerous and unhealthy

- A child or adult still living on milk alone eventually becomes anemic and weak
- They have no strength without solid food to sustain them
- And so it was with the Corinthians' spiritual growth
 - They weren't moving forward in spiritual maturity
 - They were living in their flesh; they were fleshly, Paul says
 - The word flesh used in this context refers to someone living in the way they would without the Spirit in their life
 - Living the way a natural man or woman would live
 - Like an unbeliever, though they weren't unbelieving
 - It's as if our friend in the elevator put a gag over his friend's mouth so that he couldn't interpret the conversation taking place
 - The church had the opportunity to benefit from the Spirit's wisdom
 - Nevertheless they purposely chose to live as if He wasn't there
 - So they were fleshy men, Paul calls them
 - We often use a different term today: carnal Christians
 - This term describes a Christian, who has chosen to please their flesh rather than to please God
 - To some extent, we can all be carnal at points in time
 - But a carnal Christian is anyone whose life is defined by flesh-pleasing behavior
- Carnality doesn't always mean living in outright rebellion to God
 - It's not all drugs, sex and rock and roll
 - Carnal Christians come in all stripes and colors
 - Some are hardworking men and women so focused on school or career or hobbies that they neglect their spiritual development
 - Some are so devoted to keeping up with the Joneses that their goals and priorities leave no room for the Lord's desires

- Some are so taken by materialism and comfort, that they insulate themselves far away from the toil and danger of advancing the Kingdom
 - The one thing all carnal Christians have in common is pleasing the flesh, seeking for the pleasures and approval of the world, ignoring the Spirit
 - And when we come across a carnal Christian, how do we approach them?
 - Paul says we approach them as spiritual infants
 - We bring them milk for that is all they were able to receive
 - They weren't capable of receiving solid food
- What is milk in this context? And what is solid food? Obviously, we're not talking about literal food
 - Milk and solid food are metaphors for something spiritual
 - Milk is a metaphor for simple spiritual truth
 - Simple truth includes the truth of salvation by faith, not works
 - It includes the commandments of Christ, the story of Jesus, the practices of the church, the essential doctrines of the faith
 - Solid food, on the other hand, represents the more complex truths of scripture
 - The pictures and types of the Old Testament
 - The covenants and the way Jesus fulfilled them
 - Eschatology and God's future plan for the Church, etc.
 - We're not talking about a different truth, but a deeper truth
 - This is no different than any other area of instruction
 - In mathematics, we don't start with differential equations, but rather arithmetic
 - In science, we don't start in quantum physics but in simple nature
 - Except in spiritual instruction, the stakes are much higher

- Paul says this church was not able to receive the solid food he could offer them
 - If a child is fed only milk for too long they become anemic and weak
 - They lack the strength to fight disease
 - Their body is subjected to any number of ailments
 - What was once perfect and healthy becomes unhelpful and dangerous
 - Milk serves a purpose for a time, but eventually everyone must move to solid food
 - Otherwise, their growth is stunted
 - Likewise, we can identify an immature Christian by their behavior
 - For example, the church in Corinth was fleshly
 - They were jealous of each other
 - They were creating strife among one another
 - These are signs of immaturity
 - So Paul says he has no choice but to speak to them in simple ways
 - There is so much irony in Paul's words for this church
 - Remember, the central problem in Corinth was taking pride in their supposed wisdom for having come to faith in the Gospel under an apostle's influence
 - And yet here's Paul saying they have nothing to be prideful about
 - In fact, they were so immature spiritually that he couldn't even share with them the deeper things of God
 - Paul had little choice but to give this church the barest necessities of Christian doctrine and teaching
- Paul's words to the church of Corinth remind us that our behavior is a fair indicator of our spiritual maturity
 - And if our behavior is generally reflective of the life we lived prior to faith, then we must be honest enough to see that we are spiritually immature

- We are infants in Christ
- And if we only recently became believers in Jesus, then there is no shame in this realization
- We understand that maturity takes time
- Nevertheless, we can't be satisfied with this answer
 - We must make our goal to move ahead
 - We must devote ourselves to understanding and living out the essential truths of our faith
 - To pursuing spiritual maturity
- On the other hand, if we have been a Christian for years and years, regardless of our chronological age, and we still live a fleshly life
 - Then we must also come to grips with the shame of spiritual immaturity
 - We can't excuse the fact that we are infants
 - We are like the seven year old still using a pacifier
 - Or the twenty-five year old still letting mother dress him
 - Our immaturity is shameful
 - But perhaps we've decided we don't care what our parents think or what our friends think or what the church thinks
 - Perhaps we have decided that spiritual maturity is too much of a bother, too hard, too demanding
 - Perhaps we like our immaturity and the sinful pleasures it offers
 - What will come of that choice?
 - Next time, we study where Paul goes next in Chapter 3
 - Paul explains why God chooses to work through men
 - Why Christ encourages service to God
 - Why Christ asks us to become spiritually mature
 - Why our behavior and choices matter