

=THE EPISTLES=

Lesson 2

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

AIM: to teach my pupils the general facts and truths about I Corinthians.

POINT OF CONTACT: Since the Christians at Corinth were very immature and Paul called them “baby Christians,” why not take something to the class that is dangerous for a baby to have. For example, a knife, a box of matches, or a pair of scissors could be taken to class. Ask the pupils what is wrong with the object. Of course, the class will say, “Nothing.” Ask the class when the object should not be used, and the answer will ultimately be, “When it is in the hands of a person too young to use it.” Then you could lead into the introduction, explaining that the church at Corinth was a church of baby Christians.

INTRODUCTION: The letter of I Corinthians is one of Paul's earliest letters. It was written from Ephesus during the apostle's lengthy visit there. See I Corinthians 16:8, 9, 19. Let us notice a few facts about the Epistle:

1. THE DATE: Somewhere between A.D. 57 and A.D. 59.
2. THE WRITER: Paul
3. THE OCCASION: Paul had established the Corinthian church on his second missionary journey. Read Acts 18:1-18. Note especially verse 11. Then turn also to I Corinthians 2:1-5. Paul felt a responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the church. See I Corinthians 4:15. He expected to remain at Ephesus until spring and then return to Corinth himself, I Corinthians 4:19; 16:2, 3, 5-7. He had kept in touch with the believers in Corinth. He had written one letter to them already, I Corinthians 5:9. He had heard that there had arisen contentions among them, I Corinthians 1:11. The church had asked for his opinion on certain issues, I Corinthians 7:1. A delegation had been sent to Corinth asking Paul for a clear statement concerning the Christian faith, morals, and worship. The church had come from Gentile paganism. Many problems had arisen, persecution had threatened the church, and the believers desired the wisdom of God as they sought to meet the problems that they faced. Paul writes the Epistle to help them straighten out these problems.
4. THE CITY: In order to understand the Epistle, one would need to understand the city itself. The city of Corinth was a city in Greece. It was near a mountain that was 750 feet high. The summit of this mountain served as a citadel and a temple site. It was one of the most rapidly growing and busy towns of Greece. The town attracted Phoenician settlers who made purple dye from the fish of neighboring waters. It was a town of the manufacturing of cloth, pottery, and armor. It was also a religious town of ungodly worship of Phoenician deities. It is said that there were over 1,000 consecrated prostitutes dedicated to heathen worship, and the most sensual ceremonies were performed in the name of religion.
5. KEY VERSE: I Corinthians 3:1

Let us notice some characteristics of these immature Christians, and let us compare them with ourselves and see if we have tendencies of immaturity in our Christian growth.

- I. RELYING UPON HUMAN WISDOM RATHER THAN ON THE WISDOM OF GOD. Review the verses in I Corinthians 1:18 - 2:16. Their immaturity and baby-like Christianity was shown in the fact that they sought the wisdom of man rather than God's wisdom. Paul spent several verses explaining to them that we need the wisdom of God. Notice especially in the latter part of chapter 1 where Paul reminds them that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. Notice also I Corinthians 2:14, which summarizes it by explaining it is impossible for man in his natural state to understand spiritual matters.
- II. CARNALITY. (I Corinthians 3:1-3) There are three kinds of people mentioned here in I Corinthians 3.
 1. Natural people. These are the unsaved.
 2. Spiritual people. This means the saved who walk in the Spirit.
 3. Carnal people. These are the saved who have not yet grown enough to walk in the Spirit. Sad to say, many Christians fall in this class. They are more concerned about this life than the next, more concerned about the things of this life than the next. These people are fundamental believers but live according to the course of this world and fashion themselves after this world. Notice sometimes how utterly unwise a baby is and how he tries to copy everybody else. Christians should not be this way.

- III. WORSHIP OF MEN. (I Corinthians 3:4, 5) They showed their immaturity by the fact that they worshipped their leaders rather than Christ. Now to be sure, we are to follow our spiritual leaders, to pray for our pastors, and to love and support them; but our worship should be reserved for our Saviour. Notice their immaturity. They had had three main preachers in Corinth: Paul, Peter, and Apollos. Paul's greatest talent was his Bible teaching and his spiritual fervor. He was not a good speaker. He was not big and handsome. This appealed to some. He was so deep and he was so much in love with souls that some worshipped Paul. On the other hand, Peter was more the loud, bombastic type. No doubt some said, "Well, I prefer Peter. I like that stomping and kicking and screaming." Another said, "Not for me! Give me the quiet, soul-winning Apostle Paul." Still on the other hand, there was Apollos, who was a polished orator, a man of charm, poise and dignity. Some said, "You can have your harebrained Paul and your loudmouthed Peter. Give me that polished Apollos." Others said, "I don't like that loud preaching, and I don't like that fancy smooth talk. Give me that little soul-winning missionary." Once again, we find them acting childish. They were divided over men!
- IV. WORLDLINESS. (I Corinthians 5) Immorality crept into the church. Little children have no consciousness of right and wrong. A little baby feels no compulsion about being completely undressed, eating mud, sticking his finger in somebody else's eyeball, etc. When these characteristics, however, enter into adult Christians, we are acting like children spiritually. People not knowing the difference between right and wrong need to grow up in the Lord. This is one of the things causing the loose morals in our churches; consequently, this causes loose morals in our generation. The fact is, Christians have not fed upon the meat of the Word. They simply want to get saved so they won't have to go to Hell. They leave it there. This is childishness!
- V. THE IMPROPER USE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER. (I Corinthians 11) We are entering now into a few more things these Corinthian people did that were so childish. They would take a good thing and misuse it or misconstrue it, making it evil. As you will find later, they took the matter of tongues, misinterpreted it, and made it more than it was intended to be. The same thing is true with sex, the Lord's Supper and other things. These things in themselves are not wrong, and used properly, they are sacred. To misuse them, however, is childish. A child will take a beautiful vase and break it, or he will take a crayon and mark up the wall or draw a picture on the curtain. When Christians misuse that which is right, they are childish. In I Corinthians 11, the people were taking the Lord's Supper and using it for a feast. Somebody would bring a bottle of wine; someone else, a loaf of bread, and they would have a real big time. Once again, their childishness was made manifest.
- VI. DIVISION. (I Corinthians 11) Note verse 18. Little children fuss if they don't get their way. A little child will stomp his foot and cry and scream if he is not pleased. When Christians fuss because they don't get their way or can't get along with each other, this is certainly a sign of spiritual immaturity and of their acting like babies.
- VII. THE MISUSE OF TONGUES. (I Corinthians 12) On the day of Pentecost, God had given the Christians the ability to speak in foreign languages, so that those who could not understand the language being used could hear the Gospel. These were languages understood by people of all nations, so that the Gospel could be preached in their language and they could be saved. This was a wonderful thing, but it got to be like a toy with the Corinthian people. They started what they called the "unknown tongue." Once again, a good thing was being used improperly. For this reason, Paul called them "baby Christians." There are those who would say that people who talk in tongues (so-called "unknown") are more mature Christians and have something the others don't have. Paul mentioned to the church at Corinth they were "babes," yet they did talk in tongues. Very interesting!
- VIII. THE LACK OF LOVE. (I Corinthians 13) The thing that would sum it all up was the fact that they had not matured in Christian love. A baby can have only affection and not love. How Christians need to grow in this important grace! If we have true Christian love, we become mature in our love, and we then will find the aforementioned errors corrected.