

CHURCH TURMOIL AND CHALLENGES

I hope this week is finding everyone well. I had such a wide response to Lesson 1 in this series that sent it out a week later with the answers. I was struck too by the fact that of our email group no less than four churches were currently going through some form of dramatic turmoil; with two of the four actually being close to dissolution.

In our last lesson, we considered some of the ways that divisions and dissension enter the life of a church and how easy it is to allow our walk with Christ to become compromised if we don't take special care during turbulent times.

We also saw how hard it is to act the way Christ would have us to act, how difficult it is to emulate Christ in every way when we personally are the ones being attacked, slandered, or singled out. It's extremely hard to turn the other cheek when someone has caused you great harm or pain, or has hurt someone else whom you care deeply about. Our initial reaction is to strike back, and then the other party strikes back, or solicits others to join in the dissension, and before we know it, a small incident is the beginning of a large division.

Worse is when the leadership within the body is involved and begins to exhibit behavior that's not Christ-like. This shakes our confidence and causes doubts, uncertainty; some even see their faith waiver as they question the speech and acts of people they've come to respect and follow.

In our class, We also took a long look at 1 Corinthians chapter 13:4-7 and what love really is all about. You'll note in that chapter that love is mostly described by what it is not.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

You will note that love is patient, but it does not keep score; it does not strike back, and, above all, love builds up; it does not tear down. We can see that as a division or dissension continues over time, love is pushed into the background, and getting even or keeping score, and having the upper hand become the paramount goals. As time moves on, score is kept; and recorded in the minds of the injured are every incident -- no matter how trivial. Eventually, we become blinded to the truth.

Soon a desire to win out or to survive over takes our judgment completely and we begin to read into every action some sub plot or agenda on the part of the other party. Now even innocent actions and conversations are interpreted as conspiracies and gossip and we lose the spiritual battle.

What we learned from all this was several things: (1) that improper behavior, no matter what it is, must stop immediately – see the first twelve chapters of 1 Corinthians for example; also, (2) forgiveness and reconciliation with Christ and with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is imperative before any healing can begin – burying the hatchet does not mean burying it in the back of our enemies; and, finally, (3) love means that you can't keep score. A true healing must occur if a church is to survive and grow under Christ's leadership.

Paul tells us that no matter what else we do, no matter how perfect we are, we are nothing if we have not love – and you can't have love if you're battling or causing divisions and harm within the body. Before we point a finger at anyone we need to look to ourselves and to God's Holy Word. Are we individually walking and living as Christ would have us? Have we been doing this all along? Before we can love, we ourselves need to be forgiven; and before we can be forgiven, we need to ask Christ for it. Only then can the process of healing and peacemaking take place.

So what kind of a person does Christ expect us to be? That's our lesson for this week. Let's take a look at Psalm 15 and Psalm 24.

Read Psalm 15 and Psalm 24. Answer the following questions:

1. What does Psalm 24:3-4 tell us about approaching God and dwelling with him? Who can do that?
 - a. ANSWER: Only one "who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not ... swear by what is false". We can not go to God for reconciliation with our heart full of bitterness and strife. He is looking for a sincere person who has repented and earnestly seeks Him.
2. What do these two verses mean? Do they mean that we have to wash our hands to be in fellowship with God?
 - a. ANSWER; Clean hands and a pure heart are internal conditions which are not visible from the outside, but they can be discerned by others and are known by God. Even in times of trouble and times of personal hurting, we need to keep our relationship with God, and with our fellow man, pure and without agendas, ulterior motives, and selfish desires. Having clean hands and a pure heart causes us to seek the face of God even when we're hurting, seeking His truth and His protection.
3. How do these two verses apply to the lessons that we've been studying about churches in turmoil and dealing with disillusionment within the church?
 - a. ANSWER: When we act out of selfish motives, particularly as leaders within a specific church body, we cause harm to those that we lead. If we are truly seeking God's will for His church, we will set aside our selfish desires and approach God with a pure heart. Restoring the broken relationships within a church body requires that we put ourselves aside and allow God to work through us. When a church witnesses behavior in their leadership that is clearly ungodly, they not only lose faith and trust in their leaders -- they can also lose faith and trust in God.
4. Now read Psalm 15 and list the nine things that we are instructed to do:
 - a. ANSWER 1: Have a blameless walk and do what is righteous
 - b. ANSWER 2: Speak the truth from your heart
 - c. ANSWER 3: Do not slander
 - d. ANSWER 4: Do no wrong to your neighbor
 - e. ANSWER 5: Cast no slurs on your fellow man
 - f. ANSWER 6: Despise vile men
 - g. ANSWER 7: Honor those who fear the Lord
 - h. ANSWER 8: Keep your oaths -- even when it hurts to do so
 - i. ANSWER 9: Lend money without usury and accept no bribes
5. These verses address our walk with God, our interactions with our family, our friends and neighbors, and in the work place. Can you identify which verses address each of these?
 - a. ANSWER 1: Verse 2 addresses our walk with God
 - b. ANSWER 2: Verse 3 addresses our relationship with our neighbors, friends and family
 - c. ANSWER 3: Verses 4 and 5 address our interactions in the work place

6. Why is knowing this important to us as we study struggles within the church?

- a. ANSWER: Because at the heart of every division is an evil motive or action. Satan is at his best when he can change a person's heart into believing that something wrong is actually right; and believing that something hurtful is actually helpful; and believing that tearing down is better than building up. Our only defense -- scripture -- tells us to "resist the devil and he will flee". It is only when we remain in constant communion with God, walking in His will and His way that we can have clean hands, a pure heart -- and the wisdom required to keep a clear head and pure intentions during times of intense struggle and challenge. James tells us to count our times of testing as joy, because they lead to patience. During times of struggle within the church, we need to be discerners of wisdom and truth and capable of putting ourselves aside for the good of Christ's Church. Keeping our walk with Him pure and strong is critical -- and a solid underpinning of love will not only see us through, but it will also bring a much needed healing to the church body.
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In the end, we see that when Christ is not lifted up as the head of the church, then divisions, struggles and disillusionment occur. In the final analysis, when we individually drift away from worshipping God first and we begin to care more about our own agendas, goals, priorities and desires in life ("idols" the Bible calls them), then we no longer possess spiritual insight. Our hearing, sight and ability to discern properly are all blinded by our sins and shortcomings; no wonder the truth gets so distorted.

If we are indeed to begin to seek the path of reconciliation and take on the role of peacemaker, we must first individually be reconciled with God -- it is only after this happens that we will have the ability to discern the truth and to know with certainty the path that we should follow. The only way that we can be reconciled with God is through Christ and through confessing our sins to him.

We need to commit today to search our hearts and confess our sins before God who "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness". Let's commit today to get our gaze fixed back on Christ and the Cross -- seeking first the Kingdom of God. Then, and only then, will He hear our prayers, clear our vision, and revive us again for the work ahead.

May God heal any brokenness in spirit this week as you study with us. May Christ be lifted up, and may He heal any fellowship that has been broken, any church that is lukewarm, and any soul that is weary. May He grant you a peace beyond all understanding.

Your in Christ,

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