

A FATHER IN ACTION

by Ray C. Stedman

In this section of First Corinthians, the apostle is going to be dealing with the problem of a complacent church, that is, a church filled with complacent Christians. That was also the problem we read about in Revelation 3 of the church of Laodicea, a church that was saying, "We are rich; we are filled; we have everything." But the Lord is saying, "You do not know what you are like. You are deceiving yourselves," {cf, Rev 3:17}. This is the ancient problem of spiritual lukewarmness, of being neither cold nor hot, of being nauseating, in between.

I think the problem that most discourages people from turning to the gospel of Christ today is that very problem of half-warm Christians. They are not alive, alert, on fire for God, or ready to serve him, but they are not turned off either. They are just in between in a kind of nauseating experience of spiritual life.

This section we have this morning, beginning with Verse 8 of Chapter 4, is the end of the larger section in which Paul has been dealing with pride and its consequences in our lives.

The seat of the problem here at Corinth was their love of human wisdom, their hunger for the approval of the world, and the pride they took in their own accomplishments that they felt merited that approval. And this is the problem in our own day as well.

There were four things we have already seen that the apostle saw in Corinth that told the story for him:

1. First, he had seen the divisions among them. Here was a congregation split up into little cliques gathering around certain teachers.
2. Then they were telling everyone how great a church they were, how tremendous were their meetings, and taking credit for it themselves as though it were something they had thought of and planned and worked out.
3. There was jealous strife and infighting in the congregation and the leadership, and
4. Finally, there was this complacent spirit. There was no apathy, there were a lot of exciting things going on, but there was complacency and smug satisfaction with the way they were.

Paul now describes that condition and its cause in Verse 8:

Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! {1 Cor 4:8 RSV}

What do complacent Christians look like? Paul indicates two marks in that verse:

The first one is that they have a sense of having arrived.

You meet people like that today. There are some here in this congregation who seem to feel as though they have it made; they have learned the whole truth; there is nothing you can tell them that they have not already learned; they think of themselves as rich.

Now I think you recognize right from the beginning that that is a very real danger we face here. We have a reputation for being a "rich" church, not wealthy in the material sense, but rich in spiritual teaching and instruction. I oftentimes run into people who have visited here, or had contact with us, who say that this is the feeling they get here -- that people have arrived, that there is nothing more to learn and that we are "rich" in that

sense.

There are a lot of things that can give a Christian a sense of being rich and make him complacent. At Laodicea it was because of material possessions. "We are increased with goods," they said, "and have need of nothing. We have a tremendous budget; we have plenty of money; we can do what we want; we do not even need God any more," {cf, Rev 3:17}. They were priding themselves on how affluent they were and that gave them a sense of complacency so that the Lord had to say to them, "You have no idea what you are really like -- you are poor and blind, pitiable and naked, and spiritually poverty-stricken." Affluence can do that to a church. It is always a problem.

Sometimes it is prominence that gives that sense of complacency. We here at PBC are known all over the world. We have a great reputation as a missionary church, a Bible-teaching church, and people in the congregation soon begin to think, "We have arrived; we have no further to go," and the pride of complacency begins to appear.

Sometimes it is pride in numbers or size. At Corinth, however, the problem was none of these: the problem here was they were complacent over possessing all the gifts of the Spirit -- they had them all. There are probably 21 or more gifts of the Spirit that can be detected in the Scriptures, and all of them were present in Corinth. Now that is rather amazing because today we are being told that the trouble with the church is that it does not have enough knowledge and practice and experience with the gifts of the Spirit -- that if we just had more of these gifts among us we would be a powerful church. But here was a church that had them all. Can you imagine their advertisements in the Corinthian Bugle?

Come and Visit the Total Church -- The Church that Has it All!

We hear a great deal today about the gift of tongues. Well, they had tongues, and with it they had miracles and healings and prophesyings plus a lot of what they regarded as lesser gifts -- the gifts of helps and administrations, wisdom and knowledge, teaching, service, and giving. All the gifts were present. The Apostle Paul says so right in the very first chapter of this letter: "Ye come behind in no spiritual gift," {1 Cor 1:7}. That was what was making them feel complacent: they felt rich because they had all the gifts of the Spirit and so they were self-satisfied.

I am sure their meetings were interesting. In fact, excitement is the keynote in that kind of a meeting. Nobody wanted to stay away because they had lots of things happening, but they were forgetting and already losing a sense of evangelism and of service. The church was in danger, and Paul saw it, and wrote to them to point this out. Now that is the first mark of a complacent Christian: He feels he has arrived.

The second mark, Paul says, is an "exclusive advance." "Without us," he says, "you have become kings!"

The second mark of complacency is always the sense that you do not need anybody else any more. They no longer needed Paul or any of the apostles, and there was no need for other Christians or any communication with the body of Christ around them because they were too far ahead of everybody else.

I think you will recognize this as a prominent tendency among many today. I remember some Christians that we had fellowship with just a few years ago in this area. They were alive and vital Christians who became so concerned about their teaching, and so in love with their own teaching, that they began to develop these exclusive attitudes. Now they tell people they are the only "true" church. They have the only "apostolic" ministry, and there is no need of anyone else any more. That is the danger of complacency, and as the apostle tells us and shows us here, it is always a sign of sinful human pride and a complacent spirit, and it is an offense to the Spirit of God.

What was wrong here in Corinth? Well, these people had drifted into unreality; they were victims of the world's illusions. That is the way the world lives. It loves to think in terms of getting some special ability that marks you out as different from others. It develops a smugness and a sense of satisfaction, and this is what was happening here. They were living in a dream world and acting as though the millennium had already

arrived.

That is one of the problems of churches today, here in affluent America especially. Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the prominent atheist, has described churches as "tax deductible country clubs." There is too much truth in that to laugh at it, isn't there?

Well, that is too convicting, let us move on.

Paul brings us back to reality here with a jolt in Verse 8b and following: "And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!" "I wish the millennium were here," he says, "we would love to enter into it with you, but it is clear it is not here yet. Would that it were."

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things. {1 Cor 4:9-13 RSV}

What a stark contrast! "There is the real world," Paul says. "It is tough and ruthless and cruel. On the surface it can appear to be kind and responsive, but underneath the velvet glove is the iron fist that can smash and crush without compunction. You and your dream world are just kidding yourselves. This is a battleground, and we apostles are fighting the battle. We are living in the real world, and it is not like yours at all." So Paul brings them back to reality.

Notice three things here that he teaches us about the apostles:

First, "We apostles," he says, "are pattern Christians, in effect. God has put us on exhibit in order that we might demonstrate certain things. He has exhibited us as last of all, like men sentenced to death, we have become a spectacle..." Now the word "spectacle" is the word from which we get our word "theater" -- "We have become the theater of the world, and when you look at us you will see what the world is really like," he is saying.

That is why the apostles are so important in the New Testament and to all the Church ever since. They are "pattern" Christians. They are not, as we often imagine, super saints who live up at a level that no one else can hope to attain. They were sent out into the cruel, rough, ruthless world, the worst of all, and, like our Lord, they lived in the very teeth of reality of life in order to show us how to handle it.

And notice that Paul calls them "men sentenced to death." Now men sentenced to death never deal with trivialities; they do not get caught up in secondary things. Men sentenced to death use their time to proper purpose.

If you were sentenced to death, you would not concern yourself with where your next ice cream cone was coming from. You would want to see that your relationships with others were right, and that your property was properly disposed of. You would be concerned with what was coming, and what you could do about it, and what would happen after you were gone.

Paul says that was the way the apostles lived -- in the reality of life, not dealing with trivial things, but putting their time on the things that count.

I am sure he is thinking of the gladiatorial combats that were held in the great Coliseum when, as a final act, two gladiators, both of them condemned to death, would engage in mortal combat. They would stand before the great assemblage and salute the Emperor and say, *Morituri te salutamus* ("We who are about to die salute you.") Paul is thinking of that as he writes about himself, "We are set forth as men who have already died, in a

sense, so we are not piddling around; we are not wasting our time; we are dealing with reality. We love not our life unto death; we want to make every moment count."

Notice that apostles, he says, are persecuted Christians, Verse 10: "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute." By this he indicates that there is something about the gospel that will always make us unpopular in some crowds.

This is the problem, isn't it? Nobody likes to be unpopular. We all want to be accepted, and sooner or later we are going to be put in a spot where if we are going to be true to what our faith says, true to our Lord, true to the things we have learned in the Word of God, we are going to find people ridiculing us, sneering at us, laughing at us, mocking us. Now nobody likes that, but it constitutes the great test of life -- whether we are willing to bear reproach for Christ's sake.

These Corinthians had sold out. They had so accommodated, so compromised with the world around that the world was not persecuting them anymore. The world did not laugh at them. They had adjusted their teaching so that worldly wisdom penetrated everything they said and did, and the world thought it was great. They had adjusted their actions so that nobody was offended by them, and they never had to tell anybody that something was wrong.

As we will see in the succeeding passages, the Corinthians accommodated to it all; they put up with anything in the church; they never told anybody they were doing wrong.

So, Paul says, "The world calls us fools and treats us with dishonor, but you, you are treated as wise and as understanding, as strong, and we are weak."

A Christian lawyer friend, who lives and works right in the midst of the world and who yet has a very deep commitment to the things of God and of Christ, and I were discussing some of the ways that people -- especially other Christians who long for the favor of the world -- look at Christians. He said to me, "I get so tired of being treated like the village idiot every time I try to take the Bible seriously." Now, that is the treatment you will get, but you have to be ready to be the village idiot, and not mind it at all, because it is the other group that is wrong. Paul points that out here.

I think this is what lies behind most of the issues being debated in the church in our day, this unwillingness to be laughed at by the world. Behind the inerrancy issue that is raking the church, behind the evangelical feminist issue, behind the homosexual issue, and the issue of women elders, etc., is this love of the world's approval, this desire to be like others, this unwillingness to bear reproach for the name of Christ. But Jesus himself told us that it would be there -- "in the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," {cf, John 16:33}.

The third thing the apostle points out is that apostles are "peculiar" Christians -- they do not act normally. Listen to this again:

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world [trash, rubbish] the offscouring [the scrapings of the plates after a meal, the garbage] of all things. {1 Cor 4:11-13 RSV}

That does not sound like us does it?

I was thinking of this verse the other day while lying in my new hot tub. The temperature of the water was 103 degrees and the jet was massaging my body and I was thinking of Paul who was hungry, thirsty, ill-clad, buffeted and homeless. Now, my hot tub was a gift from some very loving and generous friends here in the congregation and I am enjoying it, but lying in it I was thinking, "Is the 'hot tub' life style wrong?"

That is a question we are all going to have to face, more or less, these days, is it not?

We have so much: Is it wrong to have so much when the rest of the world has so little? There are some Christian periodicals today that are telling us, "Yes, it is wrong. We have no right to this kind of affluence." They tell us that Christians ought to take, in effect, a vow of poverty and give away their riches and live at the lowest possible level of existence. And I must confess there are times when I wonder if they are right.

I agree that we need to rethink this issue and I think it will be consistently faced by the church in the days to come -- it has got to be faced. And yet I am not at all sure they are right about the other extreme. C. S. Lewis said that the devil always sends error into the world in pairs which are opposites. His strategy is that you will get all concerned about one and back right off into the other. That is the danger -- that we will get so guilty over our affluence that we will back off into a kind of an enforced poverty which is just as extreme and just as dangerous. But having said that, it still is true that we have to be very careful in this as the Scripture warns us.

Despite this passage, there are places where Paul says, at times, that he abounded. He had to learn how to handle it. He writes to Timothy and says, "God gives us richly all things to enjoy" {cf, 1 Tim 6:17}, and therefore to enjoy them is not wrong. So we have to preserve a careful balance. I know that I must hold these things loosely; I must not covet them, or crave them if I do not have them. I must not spend all my income and all my efforts trying to keep up with the Jones' and get things that I do not have. I must be willing to lose them without any sense of complaint or of any deep loss. They are just things; that is all.

But notice the important thing here is not how we react to affluence: The important thing the apostle is underlining in this passage is how you respond to mistreatment. That is the definition of a Christian life style. "When we are reviled, we bless," he says. "When we are persecuted, we endure. When we are slandered [lied about], we try to conciliate." That is the key; that is what is the heart of the issue. That is what the Christian ought to be primarily concerned about.

When you are treated like rubbish and garbage do you try to get even? Do you try to reply in kind: "I'll give as good as I get. I'll let him know how it feels?" Or do you, as the apostle learned to do, try to work it out and try to heal the hurt? That is authentic Christianity; that is a true Christian life style.

So Paul has examined this complacent spirit here and shown us the cause.

Now he calls us back to the real world of reality and he shows us the cure, Verses 14-21:

I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. Therefore I sent to you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ["You are getting no special treatment here. I am not just zeroing in on you -- this is the way I talk to all the churches."] Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?"
{1 Cor 4:14-21 RSV}

I was at a Pastors' Conference in Wheaton, Illinois, a few weeks ago and we were meeting with a prominent Christian Education leader in this country. We were examining the principles by which you work out problems of personal relationships -- how to handle the people that are near you, especially within a family circle. As we discussed these things four principles emerged from various Scriptures that are to be in evidence if you are approaching these sticky, difficult personal relationship problems as a Christian.

Now when I was looking through this passage I have just read, I was struck by the fact that all four of those principles are present here -- Paul uses them with the Corinthians. The key is in these words in the 14th verse, "I admonish you as my beloved children." "I am your father," he said, "you do not have many fathers. I led you to Christ; you came to new life with me as your teacher. I did not give you the life (he does not mean *that*, it came from God), but I led you to it." (Just as a mother and father do not give life to their children; they are

merely the channel through which it comes.) "But I am your father," he said. "You may have ten thousand instructors and teachers, but you will never have another father in Christ. That is my relationship to you, and that is why I talk to you the way I do. I am not trying to shame you; I am not trying to make you cringe and feel awful and crawl away; I am simply trying to bring you to reality, and as a father to heal the thing that is destroying and damaging you and your life."

The first principle we looked at (at the conference) was that, in dealing with another person, you should try to convey some sense of confidence and love first. Never wipe out somebody: "If you are going to act this way I don't want anything to do with you again. Get out of my sight." Paul never does that. He never says, "I don't want to have anything to do with you Corinthians again." Rather, he says, "You are my beloved children." At the point of sharpest censure, you find this term of deepest endearment. Isn't that amazing?

The second principle was: Present a model. Notice how Paul does that here -- "Be imitators of me. I sent Timothy to you to remind you of my ways in Christ. I do not want you to follow what I say; I want you to follow what I do." Now, that troubles a lot of us. Many people think Paul is conceited when he says that. But he is not. He is recognizing the universal psychological principle that people will always follow what you do, not what you say. You can talk your head off to people, but, if your life does not reflect what you say, they will not follow you. They will pay no attention to it, because coming through all the time is that non-verbal communication that is saying, "Yes, I am saying all this to you, but it is not really very important because I do not bother to do it myself." You have no right to talk if you do not do what you say. Many parents have kidded themselves into thinking they were teaching their children right when they told them what to do, but never did it themselves. The child picked up all the vibes that were coming through, and did just like the parents did. So the second principle is: Present a model.

The third principle was: Preserve liberty. That is, do not box someone in so they have no choice in the matter. Allow them to have a choice as to what they do or do not do. Notice how Paul does that here. "I admonish you," he says. "I do not command you; I admonish you. I urge you, but the choice is yours. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love in a spirit of gentleness? You have the liberty to choose." What an important principle that is. Everybody resists being compelled to do things, but Paul does not threaten sanctions or punishment. He simply says, "You have the choice to make, and it is up to you to choose."

And then the last principle was: Confront realistically. That is, strip off all the illusions and bring things down to the way they are. That is what Paul says, "When I come I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power." What is the fruit of your life? Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them," {cf, Matt 12:33}. Do not listen to their words. Many a person has been deceived by the smooth talk of someone who leads him along with deceptive words that sounded wonderful. But the thing to do is to ask, "What has happened as a result of all these good words?"

For some time we had around here a young man of great brilliance and talent. He had an almost hypnotic influence on young people and he soon gained a reputation as an influencer of them. But as we watched him we saw that there was no real ability on his part to bring them to maturity. He could contact them and bring them into the influence of his circle, but he could never help them grow; they always remained babes and never matured. Finally it came to light that there was a terrible moral flaw in his character that he was not dealing with. As a result he was unable to help them. Talk is cheap, but change requires power. Paul says, "When I come, I will not listen to all the talk. I just want to ask, 'What have they been doing? Where is the fruit? What are the results of their ministry?'"

If we are unwilling to confront another with the reality of a situation, we simply perpetuate his own self-illusions; he goes on thinking everything is fine when it is not. Sooner or later when the collapse comes he is shocked, startled, and wiped out by the revelation of what has been going on all the time. This is why everywhere in the Word we are encouraged to admonish one another in love, to reprove and rebuke one another with all faithfulness in love. What a helpful ministry that is. Paul says, "When I come, that is what I am going to do with you."

Now this is the way he deals with the problem of complacency. The hunger of his heart is that these Christians will be really effective for Christ, as the hunger of our heart here is that this congregation will be alive and vital

and truly effective for the Lord.

Among us is this smug satisfaction, oftentimes. Paul's way of dealing with it here is the way the Spirit of God deals with it in our own lives.

I am going to close this service by having you stand for a moment of quiet meditation, asking yourself, "What is the Lord saying to me about my life? What do I need to change in view of what I have just heard?"

Prayer

Father, thank you for speaking to our hearts. Thank you for a father's love that rebukes and chastens us. "Those whom I love I rebuke and chasten." Help us to cleanse our lives of whatever introduces the sense of super-satisfaction with ourselves, of complacency and pride. Teach us to help one another, love one another, and understand that you are doing all this to bring fulness and beauty and life and danger and laughter into our experience. We thank you for it, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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