

## **Christian Maturity | 1 Cor 3:1-9; Mathew 5:21-37 | LUMC | Feb 12, 2023**

Dear Church Family and Friends: last week we reviewed what Paul described as the marks of a good Christian, one who is mentally and spiritually led by God. Today, Paul continues to define categories of Christians who are God-led. However, these Christians are of two types: the mature and immature. Immature Christians are young in faith, like toddlers feeding on milk; they need to feed on soft spiritual food. They should be gently taught in their study of the Bible, learn how to share their spiritual gifts with others, and grasp how to pray and listen to sermons with a discerning ear.

So, like the toddlers, these young Christians require tender care. Paul was saying he was aware of these Christian's humanmade cultural background that influenced them, and he gave them Christian teaching befitting their circumstances, so as not to overwhelm them with complex teaching (deep theological principles, doctrines, and dogma?). Paul was aware that until a Christian matures in faith, they tend to hark back to their childhood human cultural learning; they need tender care.

Paul says young Christians thrive on disagreements, portraying a life of the physical flesh overwhelming them to no avail. Paul says the three Christian groups staging "cold war" at the church in Corinth were immature. He describes them as being in the "flesh" that caused them to behave like infants still in need of "soft food". This tendency caused Paul to question these group's inability to disentangle themselves from their worldly thoughts, even though they had been in the church for some time.

In attempting to decode thoughts of these Christians in their infant stage, Paul used the term "human inclinations", or the tendency to stray from Christ's moral and spiritual principles, and venture into what brings human pleasure to an individual. Among what determined each member in the group's pleasure was associating with wisdom and the human spirit of their assumed leader: Paul, Apollos, or Peter. The desire to "belong to a leader" caused the group members to backbite, sometimes engaging in indirect competition. Some even harbored real anger.

Again, Paul says the first preacher in a church plants the seeds—the Word of God. The next preacher/s continue watering the seeds, thus preparing those who heard the Word (the Good News) and came to believe in Christ.

The next crucial stage is God's prerogative to grow the seeds—bring a believer, a Christian, into genuine mature faith<sup>1</sup>. The work of the preacher is to do God's mission of preaching the Word, and the Christian receives the message from God through the preacher as well as God's many other avenues that build toward a matured Christian faith. Jesus adds that immature Christians largely live on the ancient cultural laws, while mature Christians adopt the ancient but revised precepts.

St Mathew heard Jesus revising old cultural beliefs to fit into the new age, an age of Christin faith, an age of Christ's reign. Jesus reviews cultural teaching on murder.

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<sup>1</sup> Several theologians interpret Paul's statement differently; some say its God role to grow individual faith, while others like John Wesley believe individuals have a role to play in their Christian maturity (Faith and Works). Overall we can summarize Paul as relying on God's gift of Grace.

The culture judged the convicted murderer to be murdered themselves, as it is today in most countries. Jesus says the concept of murder and other evils starts in an individual's aptitudes—the anger and frustrations move the individual into final action.

Jesus counsels us to restrain our anger because it ultimately results in bad actions equivalent to murder. That is why he taught elsewhere that you and I deal with our anger immediately because delayed anger agitates the brain and provokes thought processes that cause sinful actions. Jesus acknowledges anger is ingrained in human life, but tells us not let it overwhelm us. We need to acknowledge it and start a fair reconciliation process. Jesus says people bound by blood, including Christians, get angry with each other, saying, "If you are angry with your brother or sister" reconcile as soon as possible. Do not allow anger to agitate your brain because consequences can be disastrous.

Jesus also says adultery starts in the brain, not in the action itself. Like we heard last week, the eyes are used incorrectly. After seeing, the issue is sent to the brain where the mind process starts. This is so true! All or most of us, having heard or having seen something, can retrain our senses from sending the wrong information to the brain that works through and forms an action plan. So, the first cause of an action taking place is the eye. That is why the ancients condemned the action and not the eyes. If they understood correctly, they would judge adulterous eyes to be gouged out. Remember they had an eye-for-an-eye law! When an individual hurts another person's eye, his eye was also to be hurt.

How about we mind our maturity in faith, so we are able to ask Jesus to help us to control what we see, and restrain and dispel sinful thoughts?

Jesus also reviews ancient divorce rules of offering 'certificates', thereby declaring the marriage is over! He says there is more than just a certificate. The body strives for a source that causes abhorrent thoughts that lead to adultery, etc. In these modern times Christians have come to recognize that divorce can bring healthy living rather than continuing in a sinful or lifeless relationship. There are many issues that cause married people to part ways so they can live healthy lives.

Jesus' teaching about divorce has been interpreted in different ways. In my view, everyone should be allowed the freedom to discern what to do if a marriage is on the rocks, if all counseling and mental health treatments did not help. There should come a time of decision-making, and others should respect that.

However, immature Christians will have their story to tell. I would say that the wearer of the shoe knows if it fits. I would also add that Jesus taught elsewhere, "Marriage is carnal, and there will be no marriage in heaven". In my view, it's okay for a marriage to be judged on worldly standards.

The last ancient beliefs Jesus speaks of is swearing an oath. Jesus dismissed this belief and asked believers not to swear at all because humans are not God. They cannot speak of issues with finality because their finitude limits their thought process.

It is true that people have sworn and then later denied it. I attended a game of competition, and there were three people sitting in front of me talking about an oath

they took earlier affirming a bet they had entered into. When the game concluded, those who lost became augmentative, offering reasons why they wanted to deviate from the sworn agreement. They blamed the referees and the overwhelming crowd cheering the team that worn. I moved on, leaving them to their quarrel.

Swearing does no good. Jesus advises us to simply say “Yes” or “No” and not more than that, because we sin when we swear to it.

The mark of the mature Christian is characterized by fewer disagreements, respect of other people’s viewpoints, being keenly aware not to cross other people’s boundaries, and not infringing on the rights of others. You and I know that mature Christians rarely, if ever, backstab others, or thrive on anger, rumors, lies or hatred.

Mature Christians are aware of worldly issues that can lead them to anger, but they don’t allow these issues to flourish in their minds. Whereas immature Christians may gravitate toward being evil and doing evil, mature Christians’ practice restraint. They do not enjoy causing others pain or being on a revenge mission. They do not thrive on dividing others. Instead, they live to promote the doctrine of love.

You know mature Christians; they do not live on cheap grace. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, a renowned Germany theologian killed by the Nazis in the Second World War because of his faith, defines cheap grace vividly:

“Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.”<sup>2</sup>

I submit that many modern Christians prefer to live on cheap grace. Fortunately, Jesus reminds us to follow him in the joyful though hard way, to review our faith journey in relation to our living conditions, and follow the precepts that lead us to the eternal reign of Christ.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bibleportal.com/sermon/Dietrich-Bonhoeffer/cheap-grace>