

TO SERVE IN HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY

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MESSAGE EIGHT: THE APOSTLE PAUL'S UPLIFTED HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY IN FIRST CORINTHIANS (5)

THE STRUGGLING OF OUR SERVING LIFE IN AN UPLIFTED HUMANITY WITH COMMITMENT (3)

INTRODUCTION

In our serving life we need to learn how to care for human needs. We usually consider the church life as a spiritual life, in which human needs are not that necessary. This is not true. When we are really in the church life, then how saints live, how their marriage is, how their children are, and other such matters become extremely crucial. It is easy to care for the work of the Lord and yet ignore what is crucial in the church life. If our self-life is properly dealt with we will find out that the “backbone” of the church life is the human life. This is because the church life depends upon the spiritual life, and the spiritual life depends upon the human life. The first crucial item for us in the church life is that we would be so healthy in our human living. As those who serve we must help the saints in the matters of the moral life, legal rights, human logic, and human needs. We ourselves must have a healthy human life, and we must help the saints in the same way.

After Paul deals with the four categories of problems in the saints' human living, he comes to four matters related to their spiritual living. These four matters are: 1) the one God; 2) the proper order we should abide in; 3) the Lord's Table, which concerns the matter of the testimony; and 4) the gifts, which are the most difficult matter. We should realize that Paul was not just writing the Corinthians about certain issues. He was a very tender apostle who was dealing first with their self, then with their human life, and then with their spiritual life. Today many of

us bypass the human life and even the spiritual life so that we can focus on the truth. If we do this then our truth will just become doctrine. We need to see the progression in Paul's care for the Corinthians.

The apostle Paul was making an effort to take care of the saints' need on the human side. (It seems that dealing with these needs was much harder for the apostle than simply presenting the divine revelations, as he did in most of his other epistles.) Among all of Paul's writings, the most difficult for him to write seem to be First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians. That is where we see so much of Paul's humanity. First Timothy was also difficult, because it shows what kind of person he was to carry out God's economy. The book of Ephesians, on the other hand, does not show Paul weeping or struggling so much. It just presents marvelous truth. But in these other books Paul was dealing with the practicality of the church life.

After addressing the four problems related to humanity, Paul now comes to another four crucial matters related to their spiritual life. The first matter concerns being properly related to God and to the saints; the second concerns head covering - the proper order God has appointed; the third, the Lord's supper (which indicates the Lord's testimony); and the last, the spiritual gifts.

Many serving ones are very puzzled about why there are always problems in the practical local church life. Yet, look at Corinth: the saints there and the saints now meeting with us are all the same; the environment, in principle, is the same; the growing pains of the church life are the same. We should not just point our finger at Corinth - we are the same. Our environment in principle is the same. Furthermore, we shouldn't say, "The world is strong today. It's even worse than before." The world was just as strong back then. The environment is still the same. Furthermore, the growing pains of the church life are the same. We are calling them "growing pains," not problems. We must remember that in a certain way problems are healthy. They are just signs of growth. This is the same with teenagers, humanly

speaking. They cause a lot of problems and we get bothered, but we shouldn't get too bothered. They are just going through growing pains. If they don't go through certain things, they will not grow. The local churches are made up of all sorts of saints who are in the process of growth. If church has no problems then it is old and dead. Especially when a church has a lot of young people or new ones, then growing pains are normal. Since the Corinthians had these eight categories of problems (four are human, four are spiritual), why should we be surprised if the local church we serve has them, even though all the problems may not manifest themselves at the same time? Our local church will have the same eight problems, but by the Lord's mercy He doesn't allow them to happen all at the same time.

PROBLEMS RELATED TO THEIR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Being Properly Related to God and to the Saints

The first problem related to their spiritual life may surprise you. The dear ones in Corinth seemingly had a problem with the one God and the one Lord, Jesus Christ. It is hard to believe that the church in Corinth had a problem with the fact that there is only one God. Surely if we asked them how many gods there were, they would say "one." But if we asked them how many gods there were in their practical life, they would have to say "a number." Isn't that the same today? We know that there is only one God, but in our practical life we have many gods. Sometimes when a person works at a company, that company becomes his god. Paul used the eating of things sacrificed to idols to bring this matter to the surface. They ate the food sacrificed to idols. They would say that there is only one God without realizing that by eating such food they were fellowshiping with other gods. Firstly, he told them, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." When we have knowledge then we know that an idol means nothing. Yet this knowledge puffs up, while love builds up.

Therefore, when a brother boldly declares that an idol is nothing, he must care for the saints' conscience. For example, what is wrong with seeing a movie? We may know that it is nothing. However, this doesn't build up. If we are waiting in the line for a movie and some brothers see us, then they also will think, "Oh, then it's okay to watch a movie." Then perhaps when they watch a movie, other saints will see them. We don't know how this might stumble them. Eventually the whole church might be damaged. This is why we must care for the saints' conscience. Many times things can be legal spiritually speaking, but we do not know how to exercise in love. Our knowledge only puffs up. One of the Corinthians might have argued, "Why are you all so bothered with idols or a temple? These things mean nothing." Yet the whole church may eventually have been affected and stumbled by such things. We must care for the consciences of the saints. Knowledge only puffs up, but it does not care for people. Love, however, builds up.

Concerning the one God, Paul reminded them: "There is one God, the Father, out from whom are all things, and we are unto Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ [Christ - the totality of the Triune God], through whom are all things, and we are through Him." Why did Paul write in this way? Instead of just saying there is one God, the Father, he had to modify it to say, "out from whom are all things, and we are unto Him." In other words, "When you are eating the food sacrificed to idols, are you out from God the Father? When you do such things, are you unto Him?" Paul was not talking about the doctrine of only one God; he was talking about the very existence of the Corinthians. He was saying, "God must become your existence. Don't just talk about God doctrinally. You are living a life that is not out from God. Instead your life is out from so many things of your own selection. There is only one God, the Father, out from whom are all things. This includes your marriage, your job, your food, and even your clothes. The reason why I live the way I do is that my living and my existence are out from God. Don't you realize that there is one God, and your existence must be out from this very God? Not only that, but your life must be unto Him."

Then Paul went even further. “There is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we are through Him.” We are out from God and we are unto God, but what is the process? It is our one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we are through Him. It is through Christ that God accomplishes all He wants to accomplish. The whole process of our being out from God and being unto God is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

He indicated that there are two totally different realms: one, to have the knowledge of God, the other, to live unto God and through the Lord in His economy. We must see that these are two entirely different realms. Then he also warned them that if the knowledge they possess is not lived out with love, then the weak one, because of whom Christ died, will be destroyed by their knowledge. Many times our knowledge is a problem. By stressing our knowledge, we end up losing so much. We even damage the saints.

Paul said we must not destroy the weak brother “for whom Christ died.” Even if there were only one weak and sinful brother on the earth, Christ would die for him. Christ died for every person. Yet this brother for whom Christ died could be destroyed by what we know, because our knowledge is not lived out with love. We must be very careful that our knowledge does not destroy someone who is weak.

Paul knew God, and through Christ he was unto God. He could testify, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” How heavenly and buoyant is such a statement. Yet he stated, “Do only I and Barnabas not have the right not to work?” We should notice here how Paul mentions Barnabas: “I and Barnabas.” This is interesting, because we know that they had an argument shortly before Paul’s second journey in Acts, after which they split up. Yet from this verse in First Corinthians it is clear that even after his argument with Paul, Barnabas must have joined him at a later time in some way. Barnabas must have traveled among the churches in which Paul labored. Even after their disagreement, Paul still mentioned Barnabas in an intimate way.

And continuing, he infers, “I am a soldier. I am a planter. I am a shepherd. I am a plowman. I have the full right to reap from you the fleshly things, yet I do not use my right. I can live from the gospel, yet I myself have not used any of these things.” On one hand Paul had the right not to work. He could have worked in either of two professions - as a tentmaker or a professor - but he chose not to. Yet actually he worked all the time. He was a soldier, a planter, a shepherd, and a plowman. He could say, “I am a farmer. I have the right to partake of the growth of the land. But I do not use my right.” This is Paul’s description of himself as one who is out from God, and unto Him. The Corinthians had knowledge. They could say, “I know an idol is nothing.” But Paul would say to them, “Do you really have knowledge? Do you know this very God?”

Do you know that everything is out from Him and unto Him? I not only know these things, I live them. I am a soldier, a planter, a shepherd, and a plowman. I even have the full right to ask you to support me and take care of me, but I don’t use that right. Which is the real knowledge?”

Paul further declared that, whether he was willing or unwilling, he was entrusted with a stewardship. What is a stewardship? It is a divine commitment which becomes an operation. In the human realm, for example, a brother may have a stewardship as an architect designing buildings. His stewardship is at first exercised only to small buildings. This is based on his commitment, which in turn is related to his constitution. In ten years his stewardship will be different because his commitment is different. In other words, when he first begins to work as an architect he can only do so much because of limited constitution. Eventually his stewardship will be enlarged as he becomes more constituted and his commitment grows. What is true in the physical life is also true in the spiritual life. Our stewardship is the operation of our divine commitment and is based on our constitution. When our commitment is high, then our stewardship will also be high.

His realization was: My reward is to present the gospel without charge; I do not use to the full my right in the gospel; even though I am free, yet to the Jew or to those under law, to those without law, or to the weak, I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. Corinth was famous for idols and idol temples. In the temples there were both religious monks and prostitutes. A person could worship his god and perform immorality in the same place. It was normal for feasts and celebrations to be held in such a temple. Suppose a brother gets an invitation to a feast at an idol temple. Should he go or not? He may be quite pure, but he is touching something severely degrading. He may go just to eat, and his own conscience is fine. He might say, "An idol is nothing." However, Paul would say, "Your knowledge is right, but your living should still be at a certain standard."

You should not just argue about knowledge, you should live a certain kind of life. Look at how I live. I live a life as a soldier, a planter, a shepherd, and a plowman. Then I also put myself under a certain kind of discipline. Even though I am free, to the Jews I become a Jew. To those under law I become under law. If they want to obey something, then I put myself under the same restriction. Then to those without law I become without law. I become as they are, but I still keep myself from defilement. I maintain a proper dignity. To the weak I become weak. That doesn't mean I join in their sin, but I have the full sympathy and understanding to where they are. I become all things to all men that I might by all means save some."

How encouraging is such an uplifted humanity coming out of a constitution of rich divine attributes. Only a person with rich divine attributes can live such a life. This humanity does not come by natural birth. It can only come through the process of transformation in which we are constituted with the divine attributes. Here you see the reproduction of the Lord Jesus. You see a man of God, a man of riches, a man of visions and revelations, a man of bountiful experiences, a man of wisdom, and a man of charge, partaking of the experiences of the incarnated Christ in order to save some. In all of the situations he

spoke of Paul partook of the experiences of the incarnated Christ. He partook of who Christ was as a man, and how He went through so many different things. Paul did not become “incarnated” in the same way as Christ, but his experiences were the same.

Furthermore, he considered himself not as a giver but as a receiver and a partaker: “And I do all things for the sake of the gospel that I may become a fellow partaker of it.” This is very interesting. When we speak for the Lord, are we a giver or a receiver? Those who minister should realize that if anything spiritual comes from their speaking it is through their receiving, not their giving. Paul did not say, “And I do all things for the sake of the gospel that I may become a preacher of it.” He doesn’t preach the gospel, he partakes of it.

Our natural concept when we minister is, “How can I bless my listeners?” But God’s concept is, “How can I bless you? You yourself need to be a receiver.” Our concept is, “How can I help them?” God’s concept is, “How can you be helped?” Paul here did not describe himself as a preacher of the gospel, but as a fellow partaker of it.

Paul lived a life of endeavoring. He ran to receive a prize. He contended by exercising self-control in all things. The “self” is here, but it is not the self-life, but self-control. He buffeted his body to make it his slave and testified, “Lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved.” How human, yet how godly. Very few understand what this verse means. Paul made his body a slave because he was so afraid that he would preach, yet not be approved. This is a nightmare that every serving one should be afraid of. We should be so afraid that the ones we serve would enter into glory, but we ourselves would be disapproved. We should fear that the ones we serve would receive a reward, but we ourselves would become a castaway. Paul said, “I am not a hero. I am not someone great. I run to receive a prize. I contend by exercising self-control. I buffet my body as a slave. I am so afraid that I would be disapproved and set aside.”

From Paul's letter to the Corinthians we can see two different kinds of people. One kind of person eats in the idol temple and says, "I have my rights. I don't care what people think. I know that idols are nothing." But Paul is another kind of person. He would say, "I run to receive a prize. I exercise self-control in all things. I live a life that is so different from a common life. When I see a Jew, I become a Jew. When I see someone under the law, I become under law. When I see someone without law, I become without law. To the weak, I become weak. I have only one burden - to gain them for Christ. I become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. When I exercise this way I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest I become disapproved. I am so afraid that the Lord would be unhappy with me and put me aside." When we see such a high humanity, we would tell the Lord, "Lord, have mercy on us.

We know so much, but we practice so little. Our talking is so high, but our living is so low. Lord, we surely need Your mercy that we could have such a high humanity as this in our serving life."

Consider the Israelites

Paul then gave some illustrations from the Old Testament. Israelites had the cloud, passed through the sea, ate manna (the spiritual food), and drank water that came out of the spiritual rock. However, except for Caleb and Joshua, God was not well-pleased with them. Paul used this example to warn them: don't lust after evil things (as when the children of Israel lusted for the food of Egypt), don't become idolatrous (as when they made and worshipped the golden calf), don't commit fornication (as they did during the same incident with the golden calf - fornication and idolatry always go together, as they did at the idol temples in Corinth), don't test Christ (as when they complained about eating manna, after which the Lord judged them by sending the fiery serpents), and don't murmur (as they did during Korah's rebellion and afterwards). All of these warnings apply to us. For example, we should not complain that the church life is too plain and boring. We should not lust after vacations (although it is

healthy sometimes to take a vacation - we just need to do it properly). We should not make our bank account an idol. We should not murmur to ourselves, "This isn't fair." We may know a lot, we may even think we stand, yet we must take heed lest we fall. Paul's word here was very strong. "Be careful."

How discouraging is this. Paul laid out all the items that seem unavoidable in the church life. By mentioning these things, seemingly no one can make it. Do we ever lust after evil things? Do we make certain things into idols? Do we sometimes murmur and complain? None of us can avoid these things. Which person does not go through hardships? It seems there is nothing left for us but mourning and crying.

We would say, "Lord, if this is the case, there is no way we can make it. It is impossible." However, Paul concluded, "God is faithful, who will not allow that you be tempted beyond what you are able." In other words, the temptations will only go so far. Everything Paul declared, no doubt, was his constitution, yet his admonishment was through such an uplifted humanity in sympathy. He added that God "will, with the temptation, also make the way out, that you may be able to endure it." Paul would tell us, "Yes, it seems impossible, but remember that God is faithful. In time He will make the way out that you will be able to endure it." Then we should pray, "Lord, we are thankful. When we hear these warnings it just seems impossible. But Lord, we trust in You. We know that You are faithful. You will make a way out for us so that we are able to endure it." How precious is such an admonition and encouragement.

Here we see a God-man, a mature God-man, operating totally according to God's being, God's holiness and righteousness, yet also displaying a high, uplifted humanity in this process. Now we know the secret of serving. Our serving life must be a life of a high and uplifted humanity. Otherwise it will amount to nothing.

Living a Life with Body Consciousness

Paul again reminded those who had the knowledge, which puffs up, by stating that they must flee from idolatry (thus they should not go to the temple anymore, but flee), since they had partaken of the cup and the bread. He further reminded them that they, as the “priests” eating the sacrifices, have fellowship with the altar. When the priests in the Old Testament ate the sacrifices it was the same as fellowshiping with the altar. The spiritual principle still holds true in the New Testament. We cannot partake of Christ and the fellowship of the Body of Christ while at the same time partaking of and fellowshiping with other things.

We may know that an idol is nothing, but if we eat idol sacrifices we are still fellowshiping with idols. We cannot partake of the Lord’s Table while we are in fellowship with idols.

Paul was such a person who cared only for the building up of others, seeking others’ advantage. He testified, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable; all things are lawful, but not all things build up.” Previously Paul said, “All things are lawful, but I will not be brought under the power of anything.” Here he changes it to, “Not all things build up.” This is a progression. “Yes, all things are lawful. But first, I will not be brought under the power of anything. Then even more than that, whatever I do must be for the building up of the Body of Christ.” We must take care of others’ conscience and do all to the glory of God. Paul boasted, “Even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own advantage but that of the many, that they may be saved.” And he asked the saints, “Be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ.” It is easy for us, especially younger brothers or sisters, to say about their situation, “This is too difficult for me. This is too hard for me to handle.” It is not easy for us to say, as Paul did, “I am not seeking my own advantage, but the advantage of the many that they may be saved.” Would we be willing to move to a poor or inconvenient neighborhood for the preaching of the gospel? Or would we only move somewhere when it is to our own advantage? To seek others’ advantage and not our own we surely need a high humanity.

Living According to the Order God has Appointed

Paul taught the saints in Corinth that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of woman, and God is the head of Christ. We should not say, “No, men and women are equal.” That is not what it says here. Yet we also must remember that Christ is the head of every man. Paul stressed, “Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him.” By this Paul indicated that they should live according to their natural sense, which nature has taught them. We should live according to nature. Nature teaches us certain things. For example, in the world there is currently a strong promotion of homosexuality. Yet if we see two men walking hand in hand together we have an instinctive reaction against it, because such a thing is contrary to nature.

He also beseeched the sisters to have a sign of submission to authority on their head for the sake of the rebellious angels. He was firm because this was dealing with the headship of God. In Paul’s view head covering is not just a thing to do. It is a matter of, “Is God the head, or not?” If God is the head, then men should not have long hair and women should have their heads covered. This is to live according to the order that God has appointed. However, we should not argue about or insist on such things. He stated, “If anyone seems to be contentious, we do not have a custom of being so, neither the churches of God.”

Partaking of the Lord’s Supper Properly

Few realize how degraded the church in Corinth had become in the matter of the Lord’s supper. Not only did they have divisive parties in such a meeting, but some came hungry and others came drunk. The saints even met for the Lord’s Table in a divisive way. The ones who said they “belonged” to different brothers separated themselves from the others. Then some even came to the Lord’s Table drunk. It is hard for us to visualize such a picture. What kind of Lord’s Table is this?

For this the apostle did not praise them, because they came together not for the better but for the worse. This shows that it is actually possible for the church to come together not for the better, but for the worse. Then he commented, “there must even be parties among you that those who are approved may become manifest among you.” This means that the divisions were in a certain sense unavoidable. It was so that those who were spiritual, not divisive, and therefore approved could become manifest. Paul would tell them, “Those who are spiritual must become the leaders among you. Because of this there are divisions among you, so that such ones are manifest.” We need to remember again that problems such as this are unavoidable. That is why we call them the “normality of abnormality.” If a local church has no problems then it is probably not a genuine church.

Following this, he presented what he had received from the Lord: as to the loaf, the bread, the Lord Jesus said “This is My body”; as to the cup, He said, “This cup is the new covenant established in My blood.” Paul strongly exhorted them to prove themselves and also to discern the body, lest the weakness, sickness, even death, come to them. Paul exhorted them to prove themselves. They needed to make sure that they were qualified. But how many of us would dare say, “I am qualified”? Most of us would realize “I am not qualified. My life is so poor. And I have a problem with certain brothers.” However, to prove ourselves also means to prove the Lord. It means to recognize the power of the Lord’s salvation. It is not a matter of our deeds or behavior, but rather a feeling before the Lord. “I am here at the Lord’s Table. Lord, I am so thankful that You died for me.” We always will feel that we are short. If we prove ourselves according to our deeds, no one is qualified. We always have problems with someone, or we get in an argument with our spouse, or we realize that we are distant from the Lord.

Who among us can say, “I am 100 percent in the Lord’s presence”? But when we partake of the Lord’s Table we can say, “Lord, I’m so thankful that this is Your body. I’m so thankful that this is Your blood. I’m so thankful for the new covenant established in Your blood. Thank You that my life is a life in the new covenant.” This is what it means to examine and prove ourselves.

Paul also told them to discern the body, lest weakness, sickness, or even death come to them. He had no thought of God’s condemnation. Rather he stated, “Being judged by the Lord, we are disciplined that we may not be condemned with the world.” Paul didn’t say, “If you take the table wrong, you will die!” He was not in the realm of condemnation. However, he recognized God’s disciplinary action in love. So he told us that we need to prove ourselves, and we need to discern the body. The Lord said, “This is My body,” and, “This is My blood.” We should not argue whether these are physical symbols or not. We simply have to realize, “This is the body of Christ,” and, “This is the blood of Christ” as we partake of the Lord’s Table. Again, we do not need to be perfect. As we partake of the Lord’s Table we should realize, “Lord, I would like to prove myself. Cleanse me with Your precious blood. If I am short in any way, I hide under Your blood. I may be in weakness, but I trust in Your salvation. Thank You that I can partake of this loaf and this cup.”

He concluded “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another, and if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home.” He displayed an unbelievable loving-kindness. He warned them, then promised that he would set the rest in order when he came. This is a very sweet verse. “When you have the Lord’s Table, wait for one another.” We would be more likely to say, “If you’re going to act like little kids, just don’t have the Lord’s Table anymore.” But Paul would not do this. In his high humanity he treated the saints in such a precious way.

We have to thank the Lord for such an apostle. May we also have such a high and uplifted humanity in our serving life.

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