

Mature Joy

1 Corinthians 3 | Jonathan K. Dodson | July 25, 2014

In his book, *Called to be Saints*, Gordon T. Smith writes: “**Congregations that do not pursue, with passion and vigor, a dynamic maturity in Christ are as fraudulent as a hospital not passionate and vigorous about healing and wholeness.**” Like the hospital, we should be passionate about maturity in Christ. How do we get this? By selecting the most mature church? Well, *unlike* a hospital, where healing is conferred by professionals, in the church, maturity is cultivated *by its people*. You’ve heard the adage, *grow where you are planted*. But growing can be difficult. All kinds of things can interfere. There are obstacles to maturity. How do we do it, grow? In chapter 3, there are several images that show us how to be mature. We will focus on two: Infant & Building. The infant shows us our obstacles to growth, and the building how to grow.

Playing the Infant

As Austinites we love food. We’re home to Whole Foods, open 5 new restaurants a week, have remarkably good food trucks, and then there’s all the diets & exercise to make up for it all. It’s kind of great, and kinda not. It’s expensive, and not just on your bank account. Our love for food, our relentless focus on our *bodies*, often comes at the cost of our hearts and minds, our imagination, our *soul*. Paul says he **couldn’t address the church as adults because they ate like infants**. He had to feed them with milk, not solid food, because they weren’t ready for it—literally not able. Do you know what happens to a baby when you give it solid food too soon? It chokes. Some of you choke on theology, spiritual disciplines, or holy living, because you’re “an infant in Christ.” What keeps us from getting to adulthood? Two things: “**For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?**” (3). Envy and strife limit growth. **Envy is the propensity to compare yourself to another person and want what they have.** We often think of things—wanting a house, or a car, a computer, a job, even a relationship. But envy can also play out in less tangible areas. You might look at a person or a family and *desire* their success, their joy, or even contentment. Is it wrong to be successful, joyful, or content? No. But envy isn’t about *being* those things; **it’s about desiring them so badly you steal them from people in your mind.** I experience this sometimes when I see an upcoming conference and the list of speakers. I casually scan the website to see who is speaking, but then, I get hung up on a person. They invited him to speak (and not me?)? Man, they really should have invited me. I’m good enough. Then I hear a voice, “You’re not just good enough; you’re better!” And in a moment I’ve stolen someone else’s success; I’ve desired *their* joy. How do you know this is happening, envy? You daydream about that thing. You imagine yourself in their shoes, and then you silently steal what they have. You know what happens when envy turns out into a community? Paul calls us a field. When envy and pride grow in the field, the result is **strife**. Strife can be incredibly destructive. We start judging people for what they have or don’t have, and a wedge forms between us. *You can’t see that person or love them because all you can see is what they have or don’t have.* Underneath the envy, and all conflict, lies the troll of pride. He loves to compare. You see, it’s not that you just want a good thing to be attractive, intelligent, or successful; it’s that you want it in volume. You want to be *more* attractive, intelligent, or successful—prettier, smarter, greater than X. **It’s the comparison that**

destroys you, and divides community. *Strife is envy turned outward; it's pride gone public.* Earlier Paul uses the word to refer to the *quarrels* among Chloe's people. (Even with a nice name like Chloe you can fight!) But you don't get there overnight. Outer strife is preceded by inner strife, by internal comparison, record keeping, judgment, chaffing. You might even bring a friend in on it (gossip). When that festers, and goes unchecked, it inevitably comes out in conflict. This is why it's so important to keep short accounts with one another. If you have a worthwhile concern, go to that person and humbly ask them about it. If you're making hardened judgments or stealing comparisons, seek God and others for forgiveness. We're all going to need correction at some point, if not many points, and it's a mark of maturity to go to one another in love. Jesus says if someone is offended to "leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled to them, so you can win a brother or sister" (Matt 18). The gift at the altar is worship. **Reconciliation comes before worship** (Stott). If you need to, go to someone right after our gathering today. If you don't, it will be you at some point. Please remember this. **Humility precedes maturity.** Be humble, mature enough to keep short accounts, drive the foxes from our field, and love one another (Prov 27:6). Envy and strife are obstacles to growth, but when seasoned with humility, they can have a maturing effect. Infants perpetuate envy and strife, but Spirit-filled adults repent through it. They even avoid it. How so?

Building the House

In vs. 10-17, Paul shows us how to grow by using the image of a building. The foundation is Jesus Christ and the church is built on top of his life, death, and resurrection. If you've ever seen a house built, you'll know that they pour the foundation first, a big concrete slab that anchors the whole house, keeping it from cracking or moving. It's essential. No slab, no house. But without framing, sheetrock, plumbing, electric, brick, the slab's function is unclear, and it appears useless and unattractive. You can't really live on a slab; you live in a house. That's what we're building here—the church—a livable, attractive place, on Christ. There are three ways to build a livable church: *diligently, communally, and reverently.*

Diligently. In his first imperative in the whole section Paul says, "[Let each one take care how he builds upon it](#)" (10). For the church to grow, to mature, each person must take care how they live. This means you *pay attention* to your communion with God, your beliefs, your desires, your life. Elsewhere Paul says, "*Watch your life and doctrine closely so that you ensure your salvation and those around you* (1 Tim 4:16)." Mature people care about their character, their beliefs, and their actions. They are tenacious about temptation because they know, as Owen put it, "Be killing sin, lest it be killing you." Take care. Some of you are treating the Christian life like a freefall from an airplane, hurling towards your death, you are enamored with the features of the world, ogling over human achievements. You need to pull the ripcord, and beg the Spirit to fill your chute, to jerk you to safety, *so you can truly live.* Are you taking care how you build, not just your life, how you build the church? The second way to grow is **communally.** This is why Paul uses corporate metaphors—building and field—to reinforce the necessity of growing together. Your diligence or lack of diligence affects the whole family. I see this in City Groups all the time. People who are invested, prayerful, diligent, add great value to the community and it thrives and grows together. But people who are passive, disconnected, spiritual infants create drag on the community. We need one another. Like *the Fellowship of the Ring*, each person has their part, their role, and

unique gifts to contribute to the mission. When Boromir gives into envy, trying to seize the ring of power, it affects the whole community. Frodo almost dies and the hobbits get captured. The Fellowship is fractured. Sin is communal. But when they work together, Samwise sacrificially serving Frodo, while the rest of the fellowship storms Mordor to distract the Sauron's eye, the Fellowship thrives, evil is overthrown, and peace is restored in the Age of Men. Sin is communal, but so is maturity. Our obedience/disobedience affects the whole. We grow together. Paul says, "[Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?](#)" (3:16). The "you" is plural. He envisions spiritual stones assembling to form a grand temple filled with God's Spirit. How we individually grow affects the integrity of the whole building. We mature *together*, as saints, which brings us to the third way to grow, **reverence**.

Revering God

Paul says, "[If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him](#)" (16). What's he saying? God loves the church and will protect her at all costs. It's not a wimpy love. He can back it up. He did it at the cross, and he'll do it again on Judgment Day. **God possess the power to destroy**. He is the sovereign Judge. All will face him and be held accountable for how they lived. We should tremble. We should build with reverence, awe, over the greatness of God. **God also possess the power to grow, to create**. He is the Creator. He supplies all we need through his animating Spirit and forgiving Son. God destroys and God grows according to his own right. It's what makes him God. And **when we lose a sense of the holiness of God, his grandeur, our reverence slips away, and diligence with it**. We become infants. How we build has everything to do with the kind of foundation we build on. If the foundation is cheap, we'll build with shoddy materials. But if we think the foundation is costly, of the very best materials, we won't want to waste it. We'll want to build well, even show off the costly foundation—the crucified Lord of Glory—and build with reverence. You see, reverence motivates real growth. Do you know why? Because when you compare yourself to something immeasurably superior, something infinitely more intelligent, beautiful, powerful than you could ever imagine, it has a way of humbling you, so you can take in its glory. You marvel at it. And as you do, you begin to take on its properties, depending on how you built: "[each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire](#)" (13-15). What's he saying? He is alerting us to the impending Day of the Lord, a final day of Christ's return when all men will be judged. Now, as progressive people we tend recoil at the idea of judgment, why? Perhaps because you have been wrongly judged in the past? You can be assured that God will judge rightly, with everything in view. Perhaps it's because we don't want the accountability? But can you imagine a world without accountability? Paul is saying there is a right and a wrong way to build on Christ, to live as a Christian. In particular, he's saying how we work, the decisions we make, our good works *matter and will be judged*. Those who have "taken care" how they build will receive **reward**. Those who don't will suffer loss, the word means to be deprived. They will be deprived of something, possibly God's commendation, or as Jonathan Edwards suggests, deprived of a greater capacity to enjoy God. People with rewards will very likely be able to enjoy God

more in heaven, as they did on earth. Diligence leads to delight. The longer you stand before beauty, the happier you become. The more you live under glory, the more enamored you become. You soak in glory. What about those whose work is burned up? They'll have lesser capacity to enjoy God, but won't be envious because their capacities are full, thrilled for them, stuffed with holy joy. But those works that are cheap will burn up, and they will be like the homeowner who runs out of a burning house, escaping death but looking back on their life in horror. Reverence for God changes how you grow. How are you building? Are you taking care (diligence), working together (community), building with reverence?

“There shall be no such a thing as envy in heaven but perfect love shall reign through the whole society. Those who are not so high in glory as others...will have so great and strong and pure love to them that they will rejoice in their superior happiness...and will add to their own happiness...But yet there will be different degrees of both holiness and happiness according to the measure of each one's capacity...this happiness of the saints shall never have any interruption. The rivers of pleasure will not fail, the glory and love of God and of Christ will forever be the same...there shall never be any end to their glory and blessedness...As God is eternal, so their happiness is eternal; as long as the fountain lasts, they need not fear but they shall be supplied.”

- Jonathan Edwards, “Sermon 8, on Rom 2:10,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 902.