

# Learning to Listen to God's Word Series

## Listen With Increasing Ability (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

---

---

By  
Andy Davis

### At A Glance:

- I. Introduction
- II. Growth in Ability is Normal
- III. Getting Stuck by Holding onto the World
- IV. Accept and Live by Spiritual Wisdom
- V. Conclusion

---

*These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.*

---

# Listen With Increasing Ability

## I. Introduction

### A. Illustration: My Journey of Progression

1. When I first started to read the Bible on my own, I was completely unequipped. I started reading with little knowledge of what was in the Bible—I only had the Sunday school stories I learned while growing up in the church. My understanding of what was in the Bible was very fragmented. I also didn't have any skill in rightly handling the word of God (2 Tim. 2:15). I didn't know what to do or how to do it. I simply read the Bible like any other book. Another factor contributing to my struggle and confusion was that I didn't have any resources to help me. I only had the Bible, my ability to read, and my own thoughts about what I had read.
2. Today, I have greatly increased my ability to engage with the word of God through the help God has provided. My overall knowledge of the Bible has greatly increased over the years, so I have a much better understanding of the content of the Bible. I understand the full scope and sequence of the Bible's story—awareness of the big picture. I'm still expanding the depth of knowledge I possess regarding the word of God, and this journey will continue as long as I'm mental able to do so.
3. I was taught how to read and study the Bible effective after being given a list of skills to use. I've added to my competency with the word of God by reading many books on Bible study, the field of Biblical hermeneutics (the study of proper interpretation), teaching and preaching the Bible, and significant practical experience using all that has been learned.
4. I also have a large library of resources and material that aid in my Bible study and understanding of God's word. I have books on the original languages, books that provide overviews of each book of the Bible, books that explain various people, events and elements of the Bible, books that explain each book verse by verse, books on specific topics found in the Bible, and more.

B. As I have journeyed with Jesus, my ability to interact with the word of God has greatly increased over the years. While not every disciple will be a teacher, pastor, or Bible scholar, every disciple can and should be developing their ability to know and understand the word of God.

C. We need to be encouraged to expect this development of our abilities, realize this is a normal part of a healthy Christian life of following Jesus, and overcome the major challenge that prevents this increase in our abilities. All this is found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

## II. Growth in Ability is Normal

A. Jesus commanded His disciples to "take care how you listen" (Lk. 8:18). Disciples can obey this command of Jesus by participating the basic habits related to the word of God. This includes hearing, reading, studying, meditating, and memorizing the word of God. Listening carefully means to depend on God and His Spirit to work in us through the word of God, knowing we can't understand it by our own human abilities. Being a good listener requires engaging our

mind and focusing our mental attention on the truth contained in the Bible. Another healthy response to the word of God is to intentionally use the word of God to work in our lives by focusing on being taught, shown where we are wrong, discover better alternatives to the way we are living, and learning how to put the word of God into practice in our lives. In all these ways, disciples can carefully listen to the message of God.

- B. Listening carefully to the word of God can be accomplished in another way in addition to those just listed. Jesus hints at it in our main text for this series:

<sup>18</sup> So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him *more* will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him.”  
(Lk. 8:18)

- C. The natural outcome of becoming a good listener to the word of God and engaging with God’s word the way He desires is being given more knowledge and understand of God and His kingdom by God (“to him more will be given”, v. 18).<sup>1</sup> Jesus promises and assures anyone who is a good listener to the word of God will be increasing their capacity for understanding of God and His message over time. Increasing our knowledge and ability concerning the word of God is the normal and natural outcome for those who respond to Jesus in a healthy way. Jesus claims the Father will increasingly reveal Himself to those who listen carefully to His word. Since this is the case, disciples should expect to experience growth in competence regarding the Bible when they are living the Christian life the way God expects. If this growth is not happening, it should cause us to take note and reevaluate the way we are conducting our relationship with Jesus.

- D. The apostle Paul further describes the “more” that will be given in his letter written to the church in Corinth:

<sup>1</sup> And I, brothers *and sisters*, could not speak to you as spiritual people, but *only* as fleshly, as to infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to consume it*. But even now you are not yet able, <sup>3</sup> for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like *ordinary* people? (1 Cor. 3:1-3)

- E. Before we jump into the details and explanation of this passage, we might get lost and confused very quickly if we don’t have a framework with which to approach this text.<sup>2</sup> In this passage, Paul is describing three different types of disciples according to their spiritual condition, and it is important to identify and keep each type of spiritual condition clear.<sup>3</sup> Some disciples fall into the spiritual condition of being immature in their natural progression in the Christian life (“infants in Christ”, v. 1). There is nothing wrong with being in this condition early in the Christian life because that is normal. On the other end of this condition are the disciples who are spiritually mature—also called spiritual people (“spiritual people”, v. 1).<sup>4</sup> These disciples have been following Jesus for some time and have learned the wisdom of God given to them through the Holy Spirit and the word of God (1 Cor. 2:6, 2:10). The third type of disciple

<sup>1</sup> Luke 8:9-10

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 3:14-16

<sup>3</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, [\*The First Letter to the Corinthians\*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 139–140.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:15-16

(also the third type of spiritual condition) involves those who willfully choose to remain spiritually immature even though they have had sufficient time to grow into maturity—called fleshly (“now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly”, v. 3). We can briefly add another category of person, but this group is not a disciple. There are also those who are in the spiritual condition of being separated from God—also called natural or ordinary (“ordinary people”, v. 3). This type of person is anyone who does not believe in Jesus and who isn’t following Jesus. Now that we have these types of people and these spiritual conditions in place, we can properly move through our text with clarity.

- F. Paul opens this discussion of the word of God with a gentle rebuke for the purpose of correcting a spiritual problem (“could not speak to you as spiritual people, but only as fleshly, as to infants in Christ”, v. 1).<sup>5</sup> The people in the church at Corinth do genuinely belong to Jesus and they have received the Holy Spirit (“brothers and sisters” and “infants in Christ”, v. 1).<sup>6</sup> In one sense, these disciples are spiritual because every disciple has been given the Holy Spirit and therefore no longer in the flesh—separated from God and can only live according to human ability and wisdom (Rm. 8:9). Paul is confident the work God is doing in them will take root, grow, and be successful in the end. Yet, there is a significant problem that is causing these disciples to live as if they did not have the Holy Spirit (“could not speak to you as spiritual people, but only as fleshly”, v. 1). These disciples are still ACTING and LIVING in ways contrary to the word of God, as if they are still spiritual babies, because the spiritual life has not grown in them to the point that they function according to the Holy Spirit.
- G. Paul taught the people in this church according to their ability and spiritual maturity as He planted the church in Corinth (“I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to consume it”, v. 2). Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth as he established the church there (Ac. 18:1-11).<sup>7</sup> As Paul acted as a church planter, he knew he was working with brand new, inexperienced disciples, so he taught them the basics in a way that they could understand. This was expected and normal; there is nothing wrong with being spiritually immature and lacking an understanding of the word of God as a new disciple.<sup>8</sup> Developing knowledge and understanding along with spiritual maturity takes time which these disciples didn’t have. It was impossible for them to have been mature right away.
- H. The situation ought to have changed drastically when Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians. There was a proper expectation that these new disciples move from the basics from the word of God (“milk”) to the more complex topics and a deeper understanding of the word of God (“solid food”) as they grow up spiritually. These disciples were being rebuked for still needing

---

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, [1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 65.

<sup>6</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 1:2, 1:4-9

<sup>7</sup> The dating for Paul being in Corinth during his first missionary journey is about 49 CE to 50 CE. While these dates can’t be determined with certainty, they give us a timeline for Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians. I. Howard Marshall, [Acts: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 310, David G. Peterson, [The Acts of the Apostles](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 507–509.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, [1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 65.

the basics of the Christian life and not following the expected growth process after having received the Holy Spirit. Paul is lamenting that he still has to talk to them as he did when they first began their Christian life. The main point being made here is that it is not good or right for people to stay in spiritual immaturity for the long term. We are supposed to grow up because we've been given the Holy Spirit. Growth in our ability to handle and interact with the word of God is normal and expected.

- I. While it can be easy to get discouraged with our seeming inability to grow spiritually or the slow progress that we make at times, God still expects us to be growing and developing our ability to go deeper into His word. Healthy disciples should maintain their expectation of continued progress and forward movement in the word of God. Our knowledge, understanding, and implementation of the Bible expands when we are living a healthy Christian life. This increasing ability and competence is normal. God gives us everything we need to move forward in the Christian life so that we can understand the wisdom of God and operate from the perspective of Jesus as we develop His righteousness in our lives. Yes, it is possible to fail in this as is evident by the disciples in Corinth. Yet, Paul still expects better outcomes for the people of God because God is at work in us. Are you noticeably growing in your competency and understanding of the word of God? Are you able to tell that you are moving forward? Is this an expectation you have of yourself regarding the word of God?

### III. Getting Stuck by Holding onto the World

- A. What is the spiritual problem? Why are some disciples in this church stuck and failing to progress the way they should? What is the cause? The problem is not that these disciples in Corinth don't have the ability or resources they need to do what God wants. Paul opened this letter by confirming what was true about these disciples, "in everything you were enriched in Him" (1 Cor. 1:5) and "you are not lacking in any gift (1 Cor. 5:7). These disciples have access to everything God has given them, and they have been given the ability through the Holy Spirit to understand the message of God, "For to us God revealed them through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:10). Any failure to understand God and His ways is the fault of these disciples for failing to progress as they should in the Christian life. The source of the problem is these disciples continuing to hold onto their old ways of life and refusing to let go of this world.
- B. Living like those who don't follow Jesus is the source of the problem:
  - <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to consume it*. But even now you are not yet able, <sup>3</sup> for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like *ordinary* people? (1 Cor. 3:2-3)
- C. These disciples are still in a spiritual condition of immaturity just as they were when they began following Jesus as new disciples ("But even now you are not yet able", v. 2). While this immaturity and lack of knowledge was normal and natural for new disciples to keep living like the world for a time as they began their Christian life, immaturity becomes a significant problem if people stay in this condition for too long.<sup>9</sup> When people have enough time, they

---

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:17-24

should move away from living like those who don't know God and live with a spiritual understanding that comes from God. They should increase their ability for God's word to an extent that they can be spiritually nourished on and can handle "solid food" instead of just "milk". Paul is writing this letter about four or five years later.<sup>10</sup> On Paul's view, these disciples have had enough time and teaching from the word of God to have moved out of their spiritual immaturity, but they haven't.

- D. Paul is writing this letter four to five years after the church in Corinth was planted.<sup>11</sup> According to Paul, five years is enough time to grow into spiritual maturity—at least having consistent healthy spiritual habits that point us in the right direction. Disciples who have been following Jesus for this much time should be functioning with a godly wisdom from the Spirit that is gained through the word of God. Experienced disciples have had enough time to develop an understanding of the word of God, the ability to think like Jesus, act in God-honoring ways, and be regularly nourished on the deeper, more complex truths of the word of God.
- E. The reason these disciples get stuck in spiritual immaturity is because they are still operating according to their old lifestyle, before their encounter with Jesus, and are still acting in their own wisdom and abilities ("For you are still fleshly", v. 3). To live in a fleshly way is to function on a purely human level without the power or influence of the Holy Spirit pursuing our own desires.<sup>12</sup> To be fleshly in this context is to act in ways inconsistent with a disciples' true nature and identity in Jesus.<sup>13</sup> The focus of fleshly disciples are the things of this world rather than that which pertains to God and the supernatural. The direction of our desires is the core and most significant element of acting fleshly or acting in a spiritual way. A significant number of individuals connected to the church in Corinth were unable to go deeper in the Christian life because of their worldliness.<sup>14</sup>
- F. The evidence for their inappropriate and continued immaturity is how they are acting ("For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like ordinary people?", v. 3). Disciples whose focus is still on the self, their problems, their interests, their desires, their dreams and ambitions are still living like those who don't know God.<sup>15</sup> They are living daily as if God is not in their life all while the Holy Spirit is in them, desiring and working to point them toward becoming like Jesus. Disciples who are operating according to their old life are not only self-centered, but also self-directed.<sup>16</sup> These disciples do what they think is best, they pursue what they think will make them happy, they will do what they think is right, and they rely on their own perspective. They live on a purely human level without the influence of God. Both the "jealousy" and the "strife" are a direct result of self-centeredness—

<sup>10</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 140.

<sup>11</sup> Most scholars date 1 Corinthians from 53 CE to 55 CE.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 7:5, 8:5-8, 8:12-13, Galatians 5:16-17, Ephesians 2:3, Colossians 2:23, 1 Peter 2:11, 2 Peter 2:18

<sup>13</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 466.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 88.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:5, Galatians 6:8, Philippians 3:18-19, 2 Peter 2:10

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 111.

continuing to operate according to the fleshly nature. Self-assertion and fighting to get one's way is commonplace for those who are spiritually immature and operating according to their natural nature rather than the spiritual nature God is growing in them.<sup>17</sup>

- G. The intention of this instruction is not to guilt or shame anyone for their failures. There are likely many who have been following Jesus for longer than five years and feel bad about their lack of progress with Jesus. Hopefully, this wound is not being agitated. Instead, this instruction is offered to open eyes and help develop an accurate understanding of what a healthy Christian life looks like. It is easy to experience the Christian life and sit for years without forward movement because growth just isn't expected or even thought possible after several failures to advance. There are many people sitting in churches every week who believe a healthy and mature Christian lifestyle is unreachable. The word of God tells a very different story because success in the spiritual life doesn't depend on our ability and strength but on God's. This should give every disciple all the encouragement and confidence they need to keep pressing on toward Jesus with high expectations. Hopefully a passionate desire to move to a better place is being ignited in your heart.
- H. Healthy disciples who have grown past the immaturity that exists at the beginning of the Christian life operate in life with a wisdom that has been developed from the word of God. The Bible is a regular and active part of how they approach life and the situations they face. Mature disciples are experienced in putting the word of God into practice in their lives and have learned godly discernment. They can do all this because their heart desires and attitudes have become detached from this world. They love God more than themselves. Their priorities have moved from this world to eternity. Have you let go of this world in the affections and desires of your heart? Is your life directed toward the pursuit of the things of this world? What are your goals in life? Are these goals attached to this life and this world or the next one? How might your attachments to this world be impacting your spiritual growth?

#### IV. Accept and Live by Spiritual Wisdom

- A. Prior to our main text, Paul just explained that disciples who have the Holy Spirit can and should assess reality accurately because the Spirit has revealed the truths of God to them so disciples can enjoy living according to divine wisdom (1 Cor. 2:10-16).<sup>18</sup> Disciples develop the same type of thinking that Jesus has and the Spirit of God reveals the wisdom of God through the word of God (1 Cor. 2:6). Spiritually mature disciples grow in their understanding through the word of God so they can know the truth and be discerning in every situation (1 Cor. 2:15). This spiritual wisdom and discernment are the "more" Jesus was talking about and a result of being nourished on the "solid food" of Paul.

<sup>17</sup> Leon Morris, [1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, [1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 87.

- C. While only hypothetical in the case of the church in Corinth, we can note Paul’s desire and expectation to be able to speak and interact with mature disciples:
- <sup>1</sup> And I, brothers *and sisters*, could not speak to you as spiritual people, but *only* as fleshly, as to infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; (1 Cor. 3:1-2)
- D. The Holy Spirit moves those who belong to Jesus toward becoming a spiritually mature spiritual person (“spiritual people”, v. 1). Paul expects to be able to interact with healthy disciples as spiritually mature individuals who operate according to the wisdom, desires, and soul shaping activities resulting from the influence of the Holy Spirit. He just described the spiritual person right before the text we are studying (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Key characteristics of spiritual people are their wisdom, discernment, and ability to think like Jesus according to the thoughts of God revealed through His word. These disciples live and function in harmony with what the Holy Spirit desires and does (Gal. 5:16, 5:25). Spiritual people conduct themselves in their regular daily activities as described in the letter of Galatians. The righteousness given by God becomes part of their nature and they consistently do what the Spirit of God desires them to do. They are passionate about that which the Spirit prioritizes and cares about.
- E. Spiritual and mature disciples are taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13) and have wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6) and discernment (1 Cor. 2:15) as a result. Their lives are empowered by the influence of the Spirit as they acknowledge the word of God (1 Cor. 14:37). They spiritually care for others (Gal. 6:1). A wonderful summary of what Paul means when he refers to a spiritual person is an individual who is filled with a knowledge of the will of God, possesses spiritual wisdom and understanding, acts to please God, bears fruit in every good work, increases in their knowledge of God, is strengthened with all power, is patient and persevere in the spiritual life, and is full of joy and thankfulness toward God (Col. 1:9-12). They embody and demonstrate the character of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24). This picture is very different from those who act fleshly (Gal. 5:19-21).
- F. The normal and expected path of growth leads to the ability to be nourished from the deeper and more complex truths of the word of God as a normal part of their experience (“solid food”, v. 2). Even though the depth of God may be hard to understand, these spiritually minded disciples make good progress in their understanding of these complexities. These mature disciples who are experienced with the Holy Spirit dive deep into the word of God and are spiritually nourished by it. They go ever deeper into the wonderful complexity of the deep ocean of God.
- G. So many disagreements and variations in perspective within the church is credited to the divide between disciples who remain stuck in spiritual immaturity and those who are spiritually mature and possess the wisdom of God with a rich understanding of the complexities of the word of God. Immature disciples still think, act, and value the things of this world. Spiritually mature disciples think, act, and value the things of the kingdom of God. This divide is significant and it can lead to misunderstandings among the people of God. Quite simply, immature disciples and mature disciples see everything differently. Immature disciples who still love this world think like those who do not know Jesus. Mature disciples who love God more than this world think like Jesus.

H. Do you easily get confused while learning about or reading the word of God? Have you encountered the complexities of the Bible and have grown to love and appreciate them? The level of our spiritual development is revealed in our depth of understanding the word of God. The more spiritually mature and experienced we become with Jesus, the more we will comprehend the sophisticated and complex ideas contained in the word of God. The more a person thinks like God, the easier it will become to grasp what God says. The more we think like God, the more obvious His wisdom communicated through the Bible will be.

**V. Conclusion**

- A. Every healthy disciple moves out of the spiritual immaturity they start the Christian life with because the Holy Spirit is working in them to reveal God's message and help them learn the perspective of Jesus. Unhealthy disciples get stuck and stay in spiritual immaturity for an extended period because of their continued attachment to themselves and this world. They do not grow with the Holy Spirit because they are contrary to His desires. They grieve the Holy Spirit that is in them (Eph. 4:30).
- B. Those who have the Holy Spirit in them should expect an increasing ability to understand the complexities of the word of God. The Spirit of God is in us and helps us move toward increasing our ability to know the word of God and live a lifestyle conformed to God's message. Instead of living in defeat and disappointment, disciples should live confidently and expectantly with God. God's power can and will accomplish much more than we expect!