

“I’m only human.” For us, that’s an *excuse*. We cannot be expected to avoid fights and quarrels because we have feelings, opinions, and emotions just like anybody else. When we choose sides and divide up into teams and start to wage war with voices, with votes, with violence, we resent being called to account for our actions, because nobody could be expected to just ignore or overlook the insults and hostility that touched off the latest skirmish. Whenever we give in to some basic human desire rather than resisting it, we justify ourselves by pointing out that we are only human.

For us, “I’m only human.” is an excuse. For Paul, *that’s the problem*. What happened to you when you believed in Jesus was so significant, so miraculous, so transforming that you should never again have to say, “I’m only human.” You are more than human – God Himself dwells inside you by His Holy Spirit. Jesus has redeemed you from your fallen, broken, sinful humanness and God has given you a new nature. This is incredible good news, this is the freedom that Jesus offers, because being human after the fall is *slavery*. You can’t overcome sin and reflect the image of God. You can’t choose to follow God and do what is right. You can’t love, you can’t forgive, you can’t be good, because you are merely human. Try as much as you like, you end up doing what you shouldn’t do, and you can’t do what you know you ought to. That’s what it means to be merely human, or as Paul puts it, being *people of the flesh*.

Adam and Eve give the classic example of being in the flesh: God says, “Don’t eat the fruit, or you’ll die.” But the flesh says: “It looks good. It’ll be good for me. It tastes good.” And so the flesh disregards what the Spirit says, and eats the fruit. And the spiritual connection between God and man died, and we became merely human, unable to rise above our impulses and desires to follow God.

And what immediately happens to Adam and Eve is that their fellowship is shattered. God had made these two people one, man and woman living in harmony with one another, at peace with God and the world, but when mankind became merely human, all of these relationships broke down, because the Spirit is the agent of reconciliation and peace. No Spirit, no peace.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ was crucified in order to make peace by the blood of His cross, and in order to bring reconciliation back to the world He sent His Holy Spirit as a gift of grace so that all who believe in Him could be more than human. This is the gospel that Paul preached to the Corinthians, the gospel that they believed and embraced.

But now Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians because he’s heard that their peace is gone. There are divisions and rivalries and jealousies and controversies all over the church, which is a sure sign that they are not walking in the Spirit.

Now, Paul is not saying that they are not Christians. He’s not saying that until they live better they aren’t qualified to be God’s people. His complaint is not about *who they are* (and we know this because he calls them “brothers”, right there in vs. 1), his complaint is about *how they are*

*acting*. They are acting like someone they're not! They are *acting* as if they are still merely human, as if Jesus hadn't redeemed them, as if the Spirit hadn't filled them! He's rebuking them because they are forcing him to treat them like babies when he knows that they're actually grown up.

Maybe some of your children tried this when they were little: whenever they didn't want to eat a particular food, they would pretend to gag and choke and spit it out. They know that parents are easy to freak out that way, because choking is a real danger for infants, and so they pretend to choke so that you'll keep giving them the kind of food they want. That's what the Corinthians are trying to pull. "I can't be reconciled with my brother, Paul! I'm only human!" "I can't control my sexual appetite, Paul! I'm only human!" "I need to take my brother in Christ to court; I can't just let myself be wronged! I'm only human!" "I can't get over my jealousy, Paul! I'm only human!"

Well here's the food that Paul wants them to eat. Paul wants them to eat the solid food of peace and reconciliation, and they are coughing it up. It's easier for a fleshly stomach to digest strife and jealousy than it is to let yourself be wronged. It takes the superhuman power of the Spirit to cover offenses in love and to forgive, but bitterness and fighting is easy. And so when Paul sees strife and jealousy at work, he sees a bunch of grown-ups acting like babies.

But Paul doesn't buy it. He knows better than to fall for it. He does not allow us to use our humanity as an excuse for sin. And in terms of our relationships, this is about as practical as you can get: do not use your humanity as an excuse for sin! When you are in the middle of a broken relationship, you face all sorts of struggles: it's hard to forgive. It's hard to give the benefit of the doubt. It's hard to impute good motives instead of bad motives - you just *know* that they were trying to hurt you! And it's hard to make the conscious decision to let yourself be wronged rather than continuing to fight for your rights. Lose the argument, not your temper. Lose the money, not your integrity. Lose the world, not your soul. Living this way isn't just hard; it's superhuman.

And so when we are caught up in the middle of strife, what we naturally want is for someone to come and affirm us, to tell us that we did the best we could, that nobody could be expected to endure as much as we have, that everybody has limits to their kindness, patience, gentleness, and so on.

But Paul absolutely refuses to do that, because he knows that if he accepts human limitations as the standard for behavior, he will leave you trapped. What Paul says hurts more than the person who allows your excuses to stand. But faithful are the wounds of a friend: if you believe the gospel, you are *set free* from the prison of being "merely human". If you settle for excuses, you will remain *trapped* forever in sinful behavior. But Paul has absolute confidence in the power of Jesus Christ to set prisoners free, and so he calls the Corinthians to live as spiritual people.

And now put yourself in Paul's place. Sometimes you aren't the one making the excuse; sometimes you are the one who hears the excuse being made, and they want you to agree with them. When this happens, you need to respond like Paul, with hard words of loving correction. If

you are talking to a Christian, you are talking to someone who is more than merely human, and so if you allow them to act as if they are merely human, not only are you leaving them in their chains, but you are joining them in a lie about who they really are. Instead, tell them the truth, and call them to live up to the truth.

Say your friend wants to get a divorce, but they don't have biblical grounds. Your friend keeps rehearsing how they were wronged, and they want you to affirm them in their bitterness. Your friend chooses a side in a petty rivalry and demonizes the other side, and now they want you to join their team. That's basically a description of almost all political discussions right now, by the way, to say nothing of competing theologies, denominations, and Christian debates over gender roles, educational choices, and so on. Whenever there are divisions, whenever the church splits into factions and parties, "I follow Paul"; "I follow Apollos" groups, that means that the church is acting like a bunch of babies, people of the flesh who don't have the Holy Spirit to hold them together in unity.

Now, having different opinions and convictions is not wrong. But when those opinions and convictions lead you into jealousy and strife, then you are not relying on the Spirit, you are behaving in a merely human way. The real enemy is not people who follow Paul, or people who follow Apollos, people who voted for Trump or people who didn't vote for Trump, Reformed Christians or non-Reformed Christians. The real enemy is sin. The real enemy is strife and jealousy, and the *answer* to strife and jealousy is not to tolerate a little strife since we're merely human. You need to put strife to death by the power of the Spirit, considering others more important than yourself, giving up your preferences, and not insisting on your own way.

Usually, this looks like letting it go. That angry word that you desperately want to say? Let it go. That insistence that things must be done your way? Let it go. That lawsuit that you are about to file against a brother or sister whose actions have hurt your bottom line? Let it go.

Let it go, and go to God. Turn to Him in prayer; tell Him why you're so upset, so sure you're right, and then ask Him to overcome your temptation to act in a merely human way. Ask the Spirit for a soft answer that turns away wrath. Ask the Spirit for grace to turn the other cheek. Ask Him for a special harvest of the fruit of the Spirit. When you go to God, *you are not ignoring the issue*. You are not "doing nothing." You aren't simply suppressing things or pretending that the problem isn't there. You are dealing with the problem in a superhuman, spiritual way, by casting your cares on God instead of casting stones at your brother or sister.

The good news of the gospel is that not only have your sins been forgiven through the cross, but because Jesus has given you His Spirit, you are not trapped by the limits of your broken humanity. The merely human you died with Christ, and now you have been raised up as more than human. The Spirit of God dwells in you (3:16), which means that you have everything you need to overcome strife and jealousy!

The reason why this is so important for mission, why this topic comes up during Epiphany season, is that nothing puts the light of Christ under a basket faster than Christians who can't get along. Christians who are fighting with each other cannot spread the peace of Christ to the world! Mere humans cannot be the light of the world, and so you need to be more than merely human so that the gospel can shine through your life.

What the church celebrates at Epiphany is that Jesus Christ was revealed to us as more than merely human, and since He was more than human He was able to walk through life without sin. It took someone who was more than human to overcome sin, and the good news for all who believe in Jesus is that *in Him*, because He has given us His Spirit, we too, can overcome sin, because by God's grace, we are more than merely human.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

*Let us pray:* "O God, how quickly we forget who we are in Christ. We thank you for reminding us through your Word that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Thank you that you have made us partakers of the divine nature in Christ, so that we can overcome sin and put away strife and jealousy. May we put away all our excuses, and walk this day and every day as spiritual people, fixing our eyes on all your commandments and seeking you with our whole heart. In Jesus' name we pray, and Amen."