The **city of Corinth** -- known for its pursuit of pleasure.

The **Corinthian church** -- known for the pursuit of a spiritual life.

Valley Presbyterian Church -- known for _____.

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul devotes three full chapters to spiritual gifts (chaps. 12-14). Last week, Pastor David spoke about these gifts and that the Christian life is not a retiring life. We are here to serve, to do something with our gifts.

I was reminded of this in the past week, when someone told me, "My mother always said to me when I was down in the dumps, 'Go out and do something for someone and you'll feel better.'" I imagine you have heard that saying before.

The Spirit of God and the things of the Spirit set the agenda for the Corinthian church. Our agenda here at VPC may not necessarily be the same, although several people at the annual meeting, a week ago, **dreamed about a more spiritual church; a place where we engage in deepening our spirituality.** Yes, spirituality was important to the church at Corinth, and today it seems to be vitally important to us.

That aim, to be more spiritual is a great goal, but in the Corinthian church it was misconstrued. The problem with the Corinthians was not their desire to grow in divine wisdom. The problem was they were seeking the wrong kind of wisdom from the wrong sources!

Paul criticizes them for spiritual pretensions. Some of them saw themselves as spiritually superior, which manifested itself in arrogant behavior, in jealousy and quarreling. They had become insensitive to the needs of their community who were not as advanced spiritually. WARNING: Pursuing spirituality, although very important, can lead to potentially deceptive behavior.

In spite of their pretensions to be spiritual, the Corinthians were called people of the flesh. Flesh, in the bible, is a negative connotation. It signifies a human outlook centered on the self.

In the view of the Apostle, the conflicts in the church at Corinth betrayed a misunderstanding of the gospel. The Apostle Paul came preaching Christ and him crucified, one who identified most deeply with our human woundedness, reconciling us to God—a God who alone can give a sense of who we are and whose we are as beloved people of God.

The Corinthians thought they were spiritual --We think we are spiritual

The Corinthians saw themselves as spiritual -- we see ourselves as spiritual

The Corinthians called themselves spiritual -- we call ourselves spiritual…

All the while behaving in ways that are worldly and unspiritual.

The problem in the Corinthian church, as the Apostle saw it was a distinction between being worldly and being spiritual.

Worldly behavior in church results in a church divided! Today, we have a tough time accepting unspiritual behavior in the church. The reality is people leave churches when there are conflicts. Did the Apostle know that? We have experienced that here at VPC.

Yes, we have had conflicts. I have been in the middle of some myself, I am sorry to say. We withhold names` of members from being Deacons or Elders because we do not know them or we do not trust them. We are not overtly friendly to newcomers. All of us can work on friendliness.

This passage, with criticism and accusations in it, is not what we want to hear. I don't! You don't, do you? Paul accuses the Corinthian Christians of being infants in Christ: of being ready only for milk, not solid food. They distracted themselves from serving God when they followed personalities within the church. They forgot God and behaved merely as humans.

Have we done the same at Valley Presbyterian Church? Have we forgotten God and divided ourselves? A sure sign of unspiritual behavior are conflicts we cannot get past. Is it possible that we have factions, divisions, quarreling on theology, on finances, on the style of worship services, on the music selected, on the programs we offer, or the missions we support or do not support?

Let us not be afraid to name the issues before us. Jealousy, quarreling and conflict have been present within our church. We are no different from the church at Corinth.

How honestly we assess these circumstances within our own church is critical to VPC moving forward, growing into the future. That is what the Apostle Paul's goal is for the Corinthian church, to help them grow and mature in Christ.

Perhaps the best way to look at ourselves **is instruments in the hands of God**, doing the work the Lord has given us. Our spiritual identity is in relation to God. Moreover, God is the only one who can make things grow.

Mother Teresa, when accepting the Nobel Peace prize, had to stand on a footstool to see over the podium. She looked out and said, "I am only a pencil in the hand of God, writing love letters to the world." She saw herself as an instrument in the hands of God. We are instruments too -- "Only servants" in the hands of God.

We proclaim God's salvation in Christ and lead people to that salvation, and yet, growth is the work of God. Quarrels about the merits of various leaders within a church reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian growth. May one plant, may one water, may one till the soil, but church growth (we all want this) and spiritual growth (hopefully a personal desire), is God's domain. God alone makes it grow.

Paul, Apollos, the leaders of Valley are not figures to be regarded with awe or to be compared with each other; they are simply servants, “Only Servants” of God with a common purpose and common responsibility. Leaders are set apart from others, but not above others. The work of church leaders sets them apart, but not above the others in the church.

I believe in our human weakness, we all want to be recognized. One of my favorite stories is by Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, now deceased. Nouwen reached the upper echelons of theological studies. He was a prolific author of 40 books and a theology professor at Notre Dame and at the divinity schools of both Harvard and Yale. He had made it BIG in the world of theology.

Nevertheless, in one of his last books titled *Adam,* Henri wrote about life at L’Arche, a community of mentally handicapped people and their assistants, trying faithfully to simply live the gospel together. At L’Arche, Henri, who suffered from depression and a lack of inner peace, was given a job to care for Adam, a twenty-four year old epileptic man who could not speak or dress himself. Nouwen wrote about his fears of trying to work with Adam and communicate with him. Every day his tasks included bathing and dressing a grown man. Over time, fear gave way to something new.

Nouwen realized that the young, broken down man was the place where God was speaking to him in a new way. Gradually he discovered real affection within

himself. Nouwen needed Adam more than Adam needed him. Nouwen writes, "Adam taught me a lot about God's love in a very concrete way."

Throughout his life, Nouwen had kept most things up in his head, but love grew in Nouwen's heart when he became "only a servant." It was God who made love grow in his heart.

We are "Only Servants" of God with a common purpose and common responsibility. As our scripture says, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building." You, I, the other leaders of this church, all have a common standing before God: "We are God's servants!" **"Only servants"** could be our motto. We all belong to God and derive our purpose in life from that fact alone. Amen.