

# Jesus's Church Farm

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[ 0 : 00 ] So that's 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Now we'll read the whole chapter. Let's hear God's word together. Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual, but as worldly.

Mere infants in Christ. I give you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?

Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos?

And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.

[ 1 : 11 ] For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it.

But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss.

He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves.

[ 2 : 23 ] If anyone of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a fool, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

As it is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile. So then, no more boasting about men.

All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours. And you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

It's a huge privilege to be here with you today. And I have to say that it's just fantastic to see you having these Mission Sundays. It's a brilliant way to spend the first day of a week and to do it from time to time, just take the time to hear more about what God is doing across the world.

So it's brilliant to be part of that. And I thank you very much for your warm welcome. On behalf of my wife and children, they want to apologize for not being with you today. My wife's on Sunday school duty, and my son's on screens duty at St. Columbus today.

[ 3 : 35 ] So they were conscripted to participate there. But otherwise, they would have loved to have been here with you today. Well, I'd like us to turn back together to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, which James so kindly read for us.

If you read through the New Testament, you'll see that often images are used to describe the church. There's various examples of these, and they're all very helpful.

Perhaps the most profound of all is the image of the church as a bride, Jesus coming to take his bride to himself.

You also have the image of the church as a body, many different parts. Each part is essential.

There's several images like this. In the second half of the chapter we read, we have the image of

the church as a building.

And again, that's a very helpful way to understand the church. But I want us to focus today in particular on an image that we maybe don't always associate with the church, but one that nevertheless is very important.

[ 4 : 46 ] We are going to think about the church as a farm. And the church farm is a crucial part of God's great mission.

And that's what I want us to think about together today. Let me read verses 1 to 9 again, where we see this image being set before us. If we move on to the next slide.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants to whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. I should perhaps have said that I prepared these slides using the ESV, which is ever so slightly different to the NIV, which you use.

[ 6 : 11 ] So my apologies that I didn't think of that in advance. As you may know, Paul in writing to the Corinthian church has two great concerns. These are unity and growth.

The letter was written to address divisions that had arisen in the church. As you can see, that division partly revolves around allegiance to particular people.

So some say, I follow Paul. Others, I follow Apollos. And Paul writes to them in absolutely uncompromising terms to say that that kind of division is totally unacceptable.

And 1 Corinthians, like many other parts of Paul's writings, is a great reminder that the unity of the church was one of the most pressing and important issues in the mind of the apostles.

Now, we live in a day when the church has in many ways long forgotten that. To us, church unity can often be almost like a token gesture and something that in theory we value, but in reality we've given up on.

[ 7 : 31 ] To Paul, church unity was a burning passion. To us, division is inevitable.

To Paul, division was unthinkable. And part of the reason this congregation was divisive was because they were immature and they needed to grow.

These two great concerns of Paul, unity and growth. You can see that in the first three verses of the chapter. Paul's saying you can't go on to the rich food of the gospel because you can't even get the basics of Christian unity right.

And I think that raises a very important point because sometimes we can think that as we grow in our knowledge, it justifies us separating from others.

So we think to ourselves, well, we've got a better grasp of the Bible than these other Christians. I've got a better framework of theology than the people around me.

[ 8 : 40 ] I need to leave. And I need to do my own thing because these other people aren't getting it. What would Paul say to you?

I think he would say, you need to go back to milk, not solid food. Division is rarely a sign of maturity. It's usually a sign of childishness. The Corinthian church needed unity and growth. And we, of course, need exactly the same.

So in order to address these issues, Paul uses agricultural imagery. He describes the church as a farm. And we might think, well, that seems a bit unusual, but it's actually something that's quite common in the New Testament.

Jesus himself does it. The parable of the sower, the call for laborers to the harvest. It's all farm language. Paul does it here and in several other places.

[ 9 : 44 ] Second Timothy chapter 2, he again refers to the farmer imagery, for example. James does it. He speaks about the farmer as an example of patience for us to follow.

John and Peter both talk about seed sowing as part of their imagery to describe the life and work of the church. And Revelation chapter 14 uses very vivid imagery of a sickle and a harvest.

So the image of a farm is a picture of what the church is meant to be like. So in the same way as Paul tries to paint a picture in our minds, I have a picture for you here that I'm going to just run through very quickly.

Paul sets before us five key aspects of this image. Planting, labor, growth, harvest, and wages.

Now I acknowledge that they didn't have combine harvesters in the first century. But I just like combine harvesters. So it's just an image.

[10:51] It's not to be taken literally. So I want us just to look at these in a little bit more detail. Because these are the key aspects, I think, of what it means for the church to be a farm.

And these truths apply to you here as a congregation. And I want us to think that through in a little bit more detail. And then at the end, I want us just to touch briefly on the fact that this also applies to the whole church of Jesus Christ.

So let's go through these one by one. First of all, we have planting. The church farm begins with planting. In order for planting to happen, what do you need?

You need a seed. And the whole emergence of the Christian church, whether it's in Corinth or wherever it has grown, is dependent on the existence of a very specific seed.

What is that seed? It is the message of the gospel. If you were to go back and look at the previous chapter, Paul recounts to these Corinthians how he planted that church.

[12:03] And how did he do that? He did it with a message. Let me put Corinthians 2.1 on the screen. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It was a simple, specific message. It was the news that Jesus has been crucified, and that through that crucifixion, you and I can be saved.

Our sins can be forgiven. Our relationship with God can be restored, and our lives can be transformed forever. And that's what the gospel is, a message of good news.

The seed in God's church farm is words. And every Christian in here today and every Christian around the world today is a Christian because of the transforming power of that message.

Jesus uses exactly the same imagery in the parable of the sower. The word is a seed that is sown and planted. That's where the church comes from. Step one is the seed message of the gospel.

[13:15] Now, in relation to that imagery of planting a seed, there's two key words that I want us to think about. The first key word is investment.

A seed is an investment. And I think that's a brilliant picture of how the gospel works. I don't know if any of you here are keen gardeners, but imagine that one of you was a really keen expert gardener. And you came in here to talk about gardening, and you said, I have this packet of very valuable seeds. These seeds are rare.

They are precious. And if you sow them, they will grow a plant that's just absolutely stunning. They are so safe. In fact, they are so safe, I have kept them for the last 30 years.

Now, if you were to open that packet of 30-year-old seeds, what would you find? You'd find something that's rotten and useless.

[14:26] A seed cannot be kept. It has to be invested. And by making that investment, the potential return is amazing.

Jesus spoke in those terms. Let me put John 12 on the screen for you. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Like any investment, there is no guarantee it will work. But it's guaranteed not to work if we keep it tucked away. If Paul had kept his mouth closed in Corinth, there would have been no church planted there.

The second key word is throwing. Now, when we think of planting seeds, we can tend to think of doing it very carefully. So those of you who maybe have greenhouses will maybe get a seed tray, put some compost in, and you'll carefully position the seeds.

Even at a big agricultural level, sometimes you can see tractors pulling these enormous cedars that drill directly into the ground that's very specific and focused and targeted.

[15:36] But all of these are not really how seed was sown in the days of the New Testament. For a farmer in the days of the New Testament, sowing seed meant throwing.

And as Jesus describes in the parable of the sower, some seed will fall on rocky ground, some will fall among thorns, some get snatched away, but some will fall on good soil and take root.

And the key thing I want to emphasize from that is that planting involves throwing. And I think that's a very helpful image when we think about mission and when we think about evangelism.

We can tend to think that mission and evangelism is an art, that it's all about having perfect conversations, about having deep intentionality in terms of the way you live your life, and being able to give a very competent, reasoned defense of the gospel and an explanation of the theology.

We tend to think of people who've got inspiring personalities that just draw people to them. Now, all of that is true, and that can come into it. But some people are very successful.

[16:46] Most people think of evangelism in those terms and feel like complete failures because most of us aren't like that. And I think we need to return to the New Testament model of evangelism, which is just to throw the seed out.

Throw out an invitation to a friend. Throw out a text message to tell someone that you care for them. Throw out a comment to someone. Throw out a demonstration that you care.

Often we can be so crippled by a fear of inadequacy or uncertainty. Paul was exactly the same. He was scared, weak, trembling. He didn't have all the answers, but he went to Corinth and he threw out the gospel seed.

And maybe in our lives as missionaries in our work, among our friends, among our families, maybe we just have to say, Stuff it.

I'm going to throw it out. I'm going to throw out an invitation to church. I'm going to throw out a comment that I'm going to pray for somebody. Now, most of it probably won't take root.

[18:00] Probably three quarters of it won't take root. Because if you look at the parable of the sower as a paradigm for evangelism, three out of four seeds don't work. But some of it will.

Some of it definitely will. Even if you never see it for ourselves. Paul later on goes on to say, Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

Whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully. The church farm needs to plant seed. The next step is labor, as you can see on our screen.

And the example Paul gives in terms of labor is watering. And that's an aspect of the many areas of labor required in growing crops. There needs to be watering, weeding, pruning, fertilizing, all of these things.

The key point is that as a seed begins to grow, there is still a lot of hard work needed. Watering is absolutely essential.

[19:04] For a plant, water is life-giving. But watering is also hard work. Now we probably struggle to sometimes see that because we get more than enough natural watering from the skies.

But if we were to go weeks without rain, If you had to fill watering cans and carry them down to your allotment or take them around your garden, or if you had to water an entire field, it would be a huge amount of work.

It's time-consuming, it's heavy, and you have to keep on doing it. And all the other aspects of farming are the same. Paul emphasizes that in 2 Timothy when he talks about the hard-working farmer.

One thing that's definitely true of farmers is that they have to work very hard. And there's two very important points I want to highlight here. Number one, the hard work needs to come with the shoots.

The hard work needs to come with the shoots. When the seed begins to grow, then there needs to be a lot of work to nurture that plant. And I think that possibly one of the biggest mistakes that the church in Scotland has made, and I include the free church in that, I think one of the biggest mistakes that we've made in the last 30 years is that we have tended to think that the work stops once the seed germinates.

[20:39] In other words, once someone becomes a Christian, once they become a member of the church, we tend to think, phew, job done.

But the truth is, the work is just beginning. And we need to work hard to help build up and disciple new believers, just as much as we need to work to reach out to the lost.

So when you see someone become a Christian, never think, oh, job done. Instead, roll up your sleeves and water them.

The second thing is that this hard work is all about teamwork. So yes, we need to work hard to reach out. We need to work hard to nurture new believers.

But we don't do that on our own. We do that as a team. Paul makes that beautifully clear. Let me bring verse 8 up for you. He who plants and he who waters are one, for we are God's fellow workers.

[ 21 : 41 ] And that's a vital aspect of mission, that as a church, we are all members of the same team. We are all in it together. We are all pulling in the same direction.

That's why competitiveness between churches is appalling. We are not competing. We are a team. And as a result, we all share in the success of each other's contribution.

Jesus speaks about that. Let me put John 4 on the screen. Here the saying holds true. One sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap for that which you did not labor. Others have labored and you have entered into their labor.

That's why we should be as thrilled about church growth in Buclew or in Barvis, in Scotland, in Singapore, wherever it may be.

We need to work really hard together. We need to serve together. We need to rejoice together. The third aspect of our picture, our image, is growth.

[ 22 : 44 ] In the church farm, there's planting, labor, and there's growth. Paul says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. Like any farm, there's two types of growth needed, quantity and quality.

In terms of quantity, the church farm is always aiming to get bigger. Never forget that the biblical vision for the church is big. Lots of numbers, lots of nations, lots of people.

And the church farm is here to grow bigger and bigger. Our constant prayer should be that we would get bigger because that means that more people are here in the gospel. More people are being saved.

It should be the constant prayer for the congregation here. It should be our constant prayer for other congregations as well. But the growth in quantity is not quantity at any cost.

There also needs to be quality. Now by that, we don't mean getting better people through the door. That's just nonsense.

[ 23 : 49 ] What we mean is that we want to see growth in terms of our maturity. So just like a tree, we start off as a seed and then we grow into a sapling.

But our goal is to reach maturity as Christians, to be a fully grown tree. And it's interesting that when Paul sets out the qualifications for leadership in the church, particularly for elders, he says that elders must not be recent converts.

And the word he uses is neophyte, which literally means newly planted. A new Christian is like a new plant just sprouting out of the ground, which is an amazing thing to see.

But it also means that there's a good way still to go. And all of us should strive to grow and strive to help each other grow as well.

And the key thing to remember is that the thing you need to grow is the basics. The Corinthians had stunted in their growth, so they needed milk, not solid food.

[ 24 : 58 ] And for us to grow as Christians, we always need to come back to the basics. The basics of love for God, love for other people, coming to church, praying, reading your Bible, repenting, fellowship together, rejoicing.

And these two aspects of growth, quantity and quality, remind us that mission and discipleship always go hand in hand. We need to reach out to bring people in.

We need to nurture one another in order to reach maturity. And in that work of growth that's essential to the church farm, a key mindset is needed.

What is that mindset? Is it intentionality? Is it vision? Is it zeal? Is it courage?

These are all good things, but they are not the mindset that the New Testament attaches to the image of farming. What mindset does the New Testament attach to farming?

[ 26 : 12 ] Patience. As Galatians 6 says, let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

And that makes perfect sense because when it comes to growth in the church, only God can do it. Our job is simply to keep sowing, to keep laboring, and to patiently wait for God to increase, to bring the increase.

Patience is essential. Patience for God to work, and patience with one another as we seek to serve. Our fourth aspect of our image is a harvest.

In the church farm, there is a harvest. It's a reminder that in everything we do, there is a goal. And that makes working in the church farm incredibly exciting.

We're working towards a great harvest. And as we seek to do that, especially as we live in Scotland, it's easy to think, it's easy to be discouraged, and to think the harvest is poor.

[ 27 : 24 ] But it's not. The harvest is plentiful. It's all around us. Scotland is a massive harvest field for us to work in, and so are all the other nations of the world.

That's our goal. That's our purpose. That's our mission. We are working together for a great harvest. Finally, in our church farm image, there are wages.

Paul says in verse 8, he who plants and he who waters are one. Each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Now, what does that mean? Does it imply that there's a kind of salvation by works? Does it imply that you need to earn a better place in heaven? No, I don't think it means that.

What it means is that mission in God's church farm is rewarding. In other words, it's worth it.

[ 28 : 33 ] And that's a crucial point to remember. If you think about a farm, farms smell bad. Farms are messy. Farms are dirty. Farms can be heartbreaking.

But farming is rewarding. All of that sweat and muck and toil is worth it. And it's a reminder that church should be dirty, messy, smelly, and heartbreaking.

Not in the sense of being all kind of casual and flippant. I don't mean in that sense at all. But I mean in the sense of being a gathering of broken people. People who have mucked up their lives.

People who have tried and failed. People who are at the end of their strength. People whose hearts have been broken. The church of Jesus Christ is for people like that.

And if you work away at sharing the gospel with people like that, you will see their lives transformed by the cross. And boy, when you see that, it is rewarding.

[ 29 : 41 ] It is so worth it. And it also means that what you do in the church is worth something. The image of wages tells you that God values what you do.

And it's a great reminder that you are so important in God's church farm. Whether you're involved in creche or money counting or door duty or fixing leaks or windows in the church. Whatever it may be, no matter what you are doing for God, he values that work.

We can so easily devote our time and energy to stuff that will ultimately prove worthless. Paul talks about that later on in this chapter. But working for God on his farm is so rewarding and so valuable. And it should be a huge motivation for us. So the church is a farm. You are a farm.

We have a message that we want to plant. We have members who labor together. We do so with a mindset of patience as we look for growth. We've got a mission to bring in a harvest.

[ 30 : 50 ] And we are motivated because serving Jesus on his farm is rewarding. And it is all for our one master. As Paul says, you are God's field.

But I want to close by highlighting the fact that this is not just true of you as a congregation here at a local level. This image of the church farm is also true of the whole church of Jesus Christ.

Unity and growth is not just about us being united and growing as a congregation, although that's important. It's about being part of God's worldwide church farm, the whole church of Jesus Christ. And the pattern that we have before us here in the church farm image isn't just setting out for us lessons as a church. It's actually conveying to us the theological truth of God's great plan for his church.

If you look at that image, there's a sense in which it's a great summary of redemptive history of God's work in the post-apostolic era. In other words, in everything that God has done in the days since Jesus died and rose again.

[ 32 : 03 ] There's planting. The church is planting a message. It's done that across the world since the days of the New Testament. There's labor. God has raised up generation after generation across history, across the nations.

There's growth. The church is growing, and it's still growing. It's growing in quantity. There were 120 people in Acts chapter 1. There is about 2 billion today. And it's grown in quality as well.

Beginning with simple childlike faith in the apostles, in their early days as disciples when they seemed to struggle to understand so much.

Yet they grew, and many others have grown into theological giants. There's a harvest, and we're still taking it in, and there's a reward. A reward when Jesus returns, and we enter into his new creation.

Then the farm will no longer be battling in a wilderness. It'll be flourishing in a paradise. And the key point I want to emphasize, and I want us just to finish with this, is that every step of that process is about Jesus Christ.

[ 33 : 22 ] It's not about Paul. It's not about Apollos. It's not about Bucleus. It's not about St. Columbus. It's not about the free church. It's not about Scotland. The story is all about Jesus.

Every single step of this farming process is centered on him. The seed is the truth revealed in Jesus. He is the word. He is the wisdom of God.

His is the mind that we seek to have. His is the message that we seek to proclaim. The labor is a team assembled and empowered by Jesus.

It's in his strength that we serve. Our work does not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Our growth is growth into Jesus, the process of sanctification whereby we become more and more like him.

Maturity in the faith simply means being more like Jesus. The harvest is a gift to Jesus. He sends out the laborers. We bring the harvest back to him.

[ 34 : 23 ] And the reward is an eternity with Jesus. It is all centered on him. And it is all so exciting.

Jesus' church farm has done incredible things over the past 2,000 years. He's raised up team after team after team after team of farmers who've done amazing things through his spirit working in him. Now, in the year 2020, he's raised up yet another team of farmers to do his work. Do you know who they are? You.

You. You.