

God's Wisdom: True Gospel Ministry

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[0 : 00] We're chapter 3, verse 1 through 15, and you'll remember that Paul has been seeking to correct the Corinthians.

Their view is that they are taking truths and ideas from the world around them, combining it with the gospel, coming out with something completely new and different, and then with that, divisions are arising because of the immaturity of their faith.

And so Paul has hit them with four big theological truths, and now he's going to hit them with four practical truths, and these eight things combined are his answer to their underlying problem.

And so in this first one, he deals with what I'm calling true gospel ministry because we see in it what it is that Paul is attempting to do and how things work in terms of ministry to others.

And so I want to read all 15 verses, and then we'll just go back and look at this. There's basically four sections to look at here. So beginning in verse 1, it says, But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

[1 : 25] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not ready, for you are still in the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

Servants through 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, and you are God's field, God's building.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.

[2 : 27] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw, 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.

So I've got four big thoughts, and you probably have heard this passage before, because it's fairly famous with the idea of the wood, hay, and stubble.

The old King James is wood, hay, and stubble, and that's often just sort of off-the-cuff quoted as people talk about ministry and talk about, you know, all my ministry is wood, hay, and stubble, or whatever.

So here, my first point is that true gospel ministry is about moving people towards maturity. What do you think Paul thinks about the maturity of the Corinthians, according to this passage?

[3 : 43] He does not think very much of their maturity. He says things about them like they're infants, that they're fleshly, that they're divided.

He couldn't speak to them as spiritual people. They need milk and not solid food. Now let's think about that for just a second, milk and solid food.

To say that they needed milk but not solid food, what is the difference between milk and solid food? Yeah, and the difference is not necessarily in the food.

It's in the ability of the one to eat and digest that food. So when Paul is saying to them that he's having to give them milk, he's not saying he's giving to them something false or wrong or whatever.

He's just recognizing that there's a level of maturity that he has to teach to because they're not as mature as they ought to be. And what is this food that he's talking about?

[4 : 55] He says in verse 1, I could not address you as spiritual people. So I think this idea of milk and solid food has to do with teaching and truth and doctrine. So what he wants for them, though, is just the opposite.

He wishes that he could address them as spiritual people. He wishes that he could give them solid food. He doesn't want them to have the strife, and so he wants them to be mature.

And so what is it that's going to be necessary for them to mature? It's going to be necessary for them to hear Paul chastising them in these four verses, for them to recognize that what he's saying is right, for them to change their mind about this, and then begin to go the other direction.

And I just want to talk about that for a second because what we're saying here is that they're going to need to repent. Repentance in the Greek is a word that means a change of mind, a change of mind.

So when Paul tells them that what they're doing is wrong, their repentance is coming to the conclusion, we were wrong, Paul is right.

[6 : 19] Now that's the repentance part. Now it should, like any good tree, that should have some fruit to it. There should be some change of behavior if all of a sudden you realize a thought you're thinking and a way of living is wrong and something else is right.

And so that's the first thing they've got to do is for them to grow in this maturity, they have got to repent. But the ultimate part of what we're getting to here is that Paul, in the ministry he's doing towards them, is doing ministry in order to push them towards maturity.

He wants them to grow in their faith, and that requires them to take in this truth, and there's two parts to taking in food, right? You've got to chew it and you've got to digest it.

If you chew it but you can't digest it, it's of no use to you. If you can't chew it, you obviously can't digest it because you can't get it in. Those two things about maturity are this.

It's learning truth and applying truth. Learning truth and applying truth. For there to be maturity in somebody's life, they must learn truth.

[7 : 37] They have to learn the truth at their level. They can't take in everything, and they can't take in things that are not at their level, but then they also have to take what they're learning, and they have to use it.

Whenever I'm preaching on a Sunday morning, I recognize that I've got a congregation full of people who are all at different levels spiritually.

So I have to make sure that there's something for each person, and then from church to church, season of life to season of life, there's always a bit of a difference in things.

And so I remember being at a church once where a particular gentleman, he didn't have just a whole lot of knowledge about things, and the kinds of knowledge I had to give to him was a little bit on the immature side.

But the thing about him is that what knowledge he did have, he was very eager to live it out, and you could see him living out those truths.

[8 : 40] And that's one of those things where it's like, that's really great, because now it's just a matter of learn a new truth and add it, or learn a new truth and kind of add it in there. So that's the first thing, is that if we're going to have ministry with other people, our goal for everybody we see is for them to move towards maturity.

If there's somebody who's lost, we want to see them move towards maturity, which means they've got to go by way of the cross. If there's somebody who's a Christian, we want to see them move towards maturity. How can we help others become more mature in their faith?

The second thing is verse 5 through 9, and it's that true gospel ministry is working under God's sovereignty. And listen to the verse again.

He says, 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, and you are God's field, God's building. We lived in a parsonage once in one of the pastorates that I had, and we built this frame out of two by twelves and filled it with potting soil, and we were planting a garden there.

[10 : 04] And Michelle got the soil ready. She put the seeds in. Our kids helped to water it and this kind of a thing, but when everybody was asleep at night, I would walk out to the garden.

I'd raise my hands over the garden. I would just go, like this. I'd crack open the seeds with my power, and they would just begin to grow. Now, I say that because we all know that you can plant a seed, you can water it, you can fertilize it, you can do all these kinds of things, but sometimes it doesn't grow, and sometimes it does, and sometimes you'll plant something, and you don't think you've done a lot to it, and all of a sudden, it just grows massively because the growth of a seed, once it's planted, is up to God.

Even the plants that we plant, from tomatoes to corn to whatever we plant, the growth of that plant is up to God. How fast that seed sprouts and spreads and how healthy it becomes, that's up to God, and the same is in ministry.

When we do ministry, we are giving out the seed of the Word of God, and sometimes I'm a person that's planting the seed. Sometimes I'm a person that's watering the seed, like Paul and Apollos, but if there's any growth in that seed, it's because God, by His power, has done so.

And not only that, but back in verse 5, He says, What's Apollos and what's Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. That is that God sometimes says, well, Jack is going to grow underneath this person's ministry, and Dodie's going to grow under this person's ministry, and Linda's going to grow under this person's ministry, and Michelle's going to grow under this person's ministry.

[11 : 57] We are not the ones in charge to say, oh, well, I'm going to actually grow under this person's ministry because I like them better than everybody else. That's just not the way it works.

You can look at First Baptist Church, and you start tracking and asking people, who did they grow under the most? Some of them are going to say Brother Gerald. Some of them are going to say Brother Tim. Some of them are going to say Brother Bill.

Some of them are going to say Brother Allie, you know, and maybe one or two under me, you know, because like I haven't been here as long as the rest of them, and so the point is is that God is the one who assigns what level this minister is going to be at for this person's life.

The same is true even for your own kids and grandkids. You had a season with them in which you poured into them and gave them the Word of God, and you may not be the one to harvest that.

It may be somebody else down the line. I'll give you an illustration. The Lord decreed that I would be saved on September 23rd, 1989.

[13 : 05] No way. September 23rd, 1989? Oh, okay. 1989. Same year. Well, I was at college, and here's the thing.

Not only did he decree that, but he also assigned my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, a guy named Ben, a guy named Rudy, a guy named Clifton, a guy named Richard, Coach Frank, Tommy Carter, John Sherwin, Nikki Brown, her brother Kevin, and a guy named Jay Strack, all to be a part of that process of me becoming saved, and they all played a different role in that, but the harvester, the harvester in my life was a guy named John MacArthur, and he wasn't even present with me.

It was his book that he wrote, and it was the preface of the book that he wrote, and it was his quoting scripture and saying just one little sentence with that piece of scripture that the Lord used to finally harvest my soul.

It's the scripture in 2 Corinthians 13, verse 5, that says test yourself to see if you're in the faith, and he gave this charge that this is something that Christians need to do to test themselves.

The book is called The Gospel According to Jesus by John MacArthur. The point is is that all of those people played a role. Every single one of them played a role.

[14 : 41] They just weren't the harvesters. And so, true gospel ministry is not about the servants that are doing things, but about God who gives the increase.

And so, oftentimes, we have such a short-sighted view of ministry where we say to ourselves, okay, I'm not seeing anything happen.

I'm not seeing any results, and that can be very discouraging. You know, I was telling Linda earlier, she was sharing with me something about something that I had preached that has kind of been in her mind, and I was just telling her, she's like, I don't often get to hear people tell me those kinds of things.

I don't often get to hear about the moment in your life where something happens, but a truth that we preached is lodged in the mind and comes to the mind as that circumstance comes about and is helpful in that moment.

I don't often get to hear those kinds of things, which is okay. I mean, I would love to be able to hear all of them, right, because that would be very encouraging, but here's the thing. I know that that stuff happens because God is the one who gives the increase.

[15:48] He is sovereign over the ministry, and he's the one that makes these things happen, so it helps put us in the place where we can just take our hands off and trust that God is moving, God is working, God is doing things, even when we can't see it.

even when we don't know about it, even when we're gone and we don't get to see the results of it. It reminds me of George Mueller who started a lot of different orphanages.

This is about the time of Charles Spurgeon over in England, and he vowed that he wouldn't ask anybody for money, but he would just pray. Well, a part of his life was that he had people he was praying for who were lost, and I want to say that the numbers are that he prayed for them for about 50 years, and he died without seeing any of them come to Christ, and then at his funeral, some of them, two, three, something like that, came to Christ at his funeral, and a few years later, the others came to Christ, but it's not something he ever got to see in this life, but he didn't give up because he understood this principle that God is the one who's sovereign over ministry, and so we work and do the ministry we're trying to do, giving the word of God to others in order to help them to grow to maturity, and we leave the power and the results of that in the hands of God.

Yeah, yeah, we are the workers, you're the field, and then what he does when he says, you are God's building, he's shifting his metaphor, and he wants to talk about something else now.

It's similar, and it's related, and that gets to our third point, and that is that true ministry is grounded on the work of Jesus Christ, right? So verse 10 picks up God's building, and he says, I'm a skilled builder, master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it, so let each one take care how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

[18:10] Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw, 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.

So he's shifting to this building illustration, and then Paul is saying that he himself has laid the foundation for the Corinthians, and the foundation is already what he has talked about in this letter back in chapter 2, where he said, I wanted to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

So the foundation that Paul laid is who Jesus is and the work that Jesus has done. And so any true gospel ministry builds on that foundation, takes that truth, and then builds the house around it.

Now you understand that a foundation is super important to a building. My sister-in-law worked for a builder up in Tyler, built lots of homes, and usually had his own crew do his foundations, but hired a different crew one time to do a foundation for him.

And when they, framers got out there to that house and started to work on it, the back side of the house, the back corner, was out by four inches. Now four inches is way too much.

[19:36] I mean a sixteenth, that's fine, you can work with that. But four inches, they had to cut concrete, they had to reform things. I mean they, it was just crazy what they had to do.

Paul is saying he's the one who's laid the foundation. So if anybody comes along and from there they build something that's strange and weird, then they're not taking their cues from the foundation in order to build up.

And what he does is he uses these emblems, right? Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. So you have a foundation. You could build, I mean I guess like the three pigs, right?

You could build a house of straw, you could build a house of hay, you could build a house of wood, or you could build a house of precious stones, or silver, or gold. If you take that foundation and then you build on it with one of these things and then you set fire to it, which ones will still be there when the fire is gone?

Which one will be ashes and which ones will be there? Right? That's his point is that the wood, hay, and straw, that burns up and turns to ash. But the others, they don't burn up and turn to ash.

[20:48] Now, I understand gold can melt, but it will re-solidify and the fire purifies it, right? So his point is that there is a right and wrong way to do this.

I've probably gone a little further than I want to at the moment. Let me back up. I'll come back to those images there. The point, though, about building upon Jesus Christ is that our faith and ministry, we are building on a person.

We're not building on just doctrinal truths. We're not building on concepts. We're not building on ideas. When we ask a lost person to become a Christian, we're asking them to trust a person, the person of Jesus Christ.

When we ask a lost person to receive Christ, we're asking them to receive a person. And when we tell a Christian, when we tell a Christian they need to grow in their faith and mature in their faith, we're not telling them a different story, nor are we telling them to commit to something different. We're telling them to keep believing in this person and to grow in their relationship with this person. Back in the beginning in Corinthians, Paul says this, he says, we preach Christ and him crucified to those who were called.

[22 : 22] So we preach Christ and him crucified. So we preach the gospel to those who are called to the saved and it's the power and wisdom of God.

Christians need to hear the gospel because it's the power and wisdom of God. He says in Colossians, he says, him we proclaim, talking about Christ, warning everyone, teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

So we preach the gospel to Christians so that we can present Christians mature. think about this scenario.

You're working in the business world somewhere and here's your office. Your office has got three cubicles. There's your cubicle, there's this person's cubicle, and this person's cubicle.

This person to your left is somebody who's lost. They're so lost that every time Monday comes around they come back with the stories and escapades of all that they've done for the weekend.

[23 : 31] Your ears are G-rated and you just don't need to be hearing all this. The person to your right is a person who's a Christian. They claim to go to church.

They claim to know Jesus. They also are not where this person is. They don't seem to say all the same kinds of things. You hear stories about things that sound like faith, but they also are not quite mature enough because they seem to enjoy the stories that come from over here.

And if I were to tell you, okay, listen, you Christians of First Baptist Church get your act together and start sharing the gospel with people, you might be tempted in your mind to go, oh, I got to talk to this person.

And you just look at the left, and that's all you ever see because that's where our minds are programmed, that the gospel is for lost people. But when I say that, I'm not saying that you have to pick which one.

I'm saying both. Both need to hear that gospel. You might have somebody in your life, they go to another church, but you have an opportunity to share with them the gospel.

[24 : 40] That is a good thing because that helps them to grow. My wife and I have to share the gospel with each other always. She's the first person.

As I listen to her, watch her, and watch her life, I need to be in a place of being ready to help her mature in the areas where she's not by helping give her the gospel so that she can.

And I'm the first person that she gets the opportunity to share that with. Then we have our kids, then we have our church, then we have our community, we have extended family, we have the rest of the world, right?

You have all kinds of concentric circles of people in your life, and the goal is share the gospel. Don't worry about if they're lost or saved, because they both need to hear it.

And if they're lost, they'll hear it, and God will use it in their life the way it needs to be used. And if they're saved, God will use it in their life the way He needs to use it. Now, granted, there are things that we would tell Christians to do that we wouldn't necessarily tell non-Christians to do, but those all flow out of the gospel.

[25 : 47] I'll give you one example. You've got a guy over here and a guy over here, and I'm going to tell both of these guys the gospel. The Christian, one of the things that flows out of the gospel is that I'm looking at him, he's married, and I'm saying, listen, you need to love your wife the way Christ loved the church.

And your only way and hope of being able to do that is because Christ has paid the price for you. But I hear this guy talking and I go like, man, do you love your wife?

I listen to him talk, I listen to the things he says, do you love your wife? Oh, well, yeah. I said, you know, as Christians, we're called to love our wives the way Christ loved the church. And you'll never be able to do that unless you repent of your sin and turn to Christ.

Now, I may not say it that boldly, but you understand the difference of what I'm saying. We have one message to share. We have one message to share. All right, that's the end of that third point. Now we'll go on to the last point about how ministry survives the day of judgment. And let's go back to the gold, silver, precious stones, the wood, hay, and stubble because I was ready to talk about that.

[26 : 55] What Paul is saying in verses 12 through 13 is that as he's looking at people build on the foundation, the quest or the idea is that in verse 13, each one's work will become manifest for the day will disclose it.

That day is judgment day. On judgment day, it will be revealed by fire whether the ministry that we've been doing was ministry built upon the right foundation with the right truths or whether it's wood, hay, and stubble.

And it's going to be the ministry that we do with our spouse, with our children, with the church, with the world around us. It's every area of our lives.

And it's going to be tested by fire whether or not it stands the test, whether it is true ministry or not. And on one hand, that's a challenge and that's a warning to all of us to be sure that the ministry that we're doing is the ministry that the Lord would have us to do.

And the way we know that is by looking at his word. The foundation is Jesus Christ, now build upon Jesus Christ. It's not something we have to sort of feel our way through. We just look at the word, we take what's in the word and we give it.

[28 : 15] And it goes back, you know, I talk about the three Ps of ministry, right? Proclaim the word in prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit, patiently waiting. Here we are waiting for that day to find out, is the ministry we're doing something that will last?

Is the ministry that happened over here at this church or in this part of the world, is that a ministry that is true and right and good and lasts? We'll have to wait to see because on that day it's going to be disclosed.

So it's a warning to us to be sure we're doing things the way God's word speaks. But also it's a comfort because what he's saying is that not only is it going to be tested, but then there's a reward. He says, if anyone, if the work anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. So we know that we get heaven.

And oftentimes we think of heaven as the final full reward, but there are more delights to have past just being able to be in heaven with the Lord forever. When we do the ministry the way he's called us to do it, building upon Christ as the foundation, there are rewards.

[29 : 30] Now what are those rewards? I have no idea. I have no idea. He says in verse 15, if anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself be saved, but only as through fire, or in other words, by the skin of his teeth.

Right? So they're both saved, but one did ministry in such a way that they weren't building on the foundation of Christ. They have one that was. And it's just a thing.

The results are going to be there. And I know that oftentimes I tend to want to call the judgment down now. You know, I see different ministries, and I think, I know that's got to be wrong.

But really it's not my place to give the final judgment. That's the Lord's. I can only look at that ministry and go, I don't think that's right. I need to do the right thing. And that needs to drive me to do the right thing.

So let's then talk about this. What does all this mean for us? How do we need to live out based upon what we're seeing here? Three things.

[30 : 42] One, always seek to mature in your own faith. Always seek to mature in your own faith. If true gospel ministry is about maturing, then this is what God wants for us, is for us to grow up.

God wants to grow up in our faith. When we were saved, we were infants in Christ, we were babes in Christ, we were born again, right? And now we need to mature, we need to grow up.

We ate milk for a while, and now we need to begin to start to eat some solid foods. And that maturity happens from that two-prong idea.

It's about things that we need to know and things we need to do. Right? The things we know, the truths we learn from God's word, the reality that he describes, the way he thinks, the doctrines and

things that are there.

We need to learn those things, and then those things need to inform how we live, how we walk, how we think. And so I just want you to think for a little bit about your own life and say, well, what things do I not know deep enough?

[31 : 54] What are things that I do not know well enough? And what areas of my life am I not really living out the Christian life as well as I should, as well as I could?

And maybe for the next six months, your task is to deal with one or the other of those things.

Usually what will happen is both will kind of get worked on at the same time.

But if you were to target one of those areas, which would you target? If you think of the Christian life as paver stones all the way to heaven, you're standing on a stone, and I'm just saying to you, what can you do to step to the next paver stone in six months?

Is it your prayer life? Is it your Bible intake? Is it your understanding of the cross? Is it your understanding of God's character? What is it that you need to grow in and take ownership of that and figure out ways to grow?

And if you need help with that, that's why I'm here. And then take six months to really try to grow in that area. And the reason I say six months is because anything that requires us to do something disciplined takes time for that to become ingrained.

[33 : 16] And so seek to grow mature to yourself. Secondly, we've got to know the gospel inside and out, forwards and backwards. It's interesting to me that, you know, I've said this before.

So many people don't understand the question, what is the gospel? I told you a story about the guy at one of our churches that when I would say, what is the gospel? He would walk up to me after church and say, pastor, here's the gospel.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And I was always like, okay. Right. But, you know, if you begin to think about what the gospel is, I know there are some truths in scripture that seem a little further out and not really vitally connected to the core.

There's definitely a core of doctrines that we need to get right. And then there's definitely another layer outside of that of doctrines that are really, really important to get right.

And then there's a whole layer of doctrines out here that are not quite as critical, right? Like, for instance, the timing of when Jesus is coming back is not nearly as important as believing that he is coming back visibly and bodily.

[34 : 34] So when I talk about knowing the gospel, I'm talking about this center and the second circle that we need to know these things. It's interesting to me that things like justification by faith alone has implications for all kinds of things.

That we are set free from our sin is a massive truth that needs to get applied to me as a husband, that needs to get applied to me as a pastor, that needs to get applied to me as a father.

And part of learning the gospel is then taking it and looking at what it means for all the areas of my life. What does the gospel mean about my physical health?

What does the gospel mean for my emotional health? So when I talk about learning the gospel, I'm not just saying memorize a gospel outline, but really take in everything that this is about.

And the third and final thing is just constantly proclaim the gospel to those around you. Sometimes this is going to be in just a short 15 second response to a question or to a statement.

[35 : 55] Sometimes this is a planned sit down and go through a gospel outline with someone. You know, do you consider yourself a good person? Yes. Have you ever told a lie?

Yes. What does that make you? A liar. Sometimes it's a planned spending time going through a book of the Bible or a book about the Bible.

Right? Both are good. You know, you can say to yourself that maybe there's somebody that they're struggling with a particular thing. Maybe you come across somebody who is always doubting their salvation.

Well, 1 John is a great book to go to that you could say, you know, let's sit and let's meet together once a week and let's read through this book together. And just read it together.

Read it out loud together. Don't try to read it separately and come and talk about it, but just read it out loud together and talk about what you think it means, you know. Or it may be that you need to go through a particular book.

[36 : 57] Somebody's struggling with a particular issue. So maybe they're struggling with anger. There's some great books that help Christians deal with anger from a very biblical and godly

perspective. The point is, is to always look for individuals in your life, open doors, opportunities to speak the gospel.

The more you know the gospel, the easier it is for it to come out in those 15 second moments, in those outlined sort of presentations, or in those, you know, weekly discipleship meetings where you can kind of sit down and talk with someone through something.

But find how you can do that and make sure that you're trying to proclaim the gospel. .

Thank you.