

Success or Failure

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[0 : 00] The first reading is taken from Acts, chapter 18, and it's verses 18 to 22. After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Achela. At Chancra he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.

And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills, and he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.

After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Now a Jew named Apollos, the native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

[1 : 24] He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Achela heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Our second reading today is from the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 3, verses 1 to 17. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of 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?

[2 : 40] What then is Apollos? What is Paul? 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 labour. For we are God's fellow workers. 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. 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, 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.

[4 : 10] Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

And let's pray as we begin. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for your words this morning, and we pray, having heard your word, and now hearing it explained and proclaimed, we pray, please, that you would revive our souls and make us who are spiritually simple, wise.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, the scandal surrounding international athletics finally erupted two weeks ago.

Here are the headlines. Sabotaged. Sports' worst drug scandal cast huge shadow over London Olympics, with a photograph behind of the Olympic emblem in flames.

[5 : 24] The commission set up by the World Anti-Doping Agency revealed the corruption and bribery at the heart of the International Association of Athletic Federations.

Russia stands accused of systematically doping its athletes and sabotaging the 2012 Olympics. Now, shocking as those revelations were, 1 Corinthians chapter 3 warns of the potential of an even greater scandal, a sabotage far more serious, and that is sabotaging the local church, sabotaging the building of the local church.

Just as it seems the day of reckoning has arrived for the IAAF, so in that reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 3, God says very clearly there will be a day of reckoning for Christian ministry and for Christian churches.

Have a look, will you, go at verse 13. 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.

In other words, says the Apostle Paul, it is quite possible to be involved in building something that looks like a genuine church, but actually is nothing of the sort.

[6 : 47] And therefore, the aim of this talk really is very simple. It is to see what authentic, genuine Christian ministry looks like. It's vitally important for any church that what we are building together is authentic and is genuine.

Well, if you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, clearly there's a whole variety of churches in London. it's vitally important that we know which ones are genuine, which is the real deal, what constitutes a good church, which ones need to be avoided.

Well, there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, the problem of worldliness.

Have a look at verses 3 and 4, sorry, verses 1 to 4 of chapter 3.

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

And even now you're not ready, for you are still of 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?

[8 : 12] Now these verses, I think, help us to get to the very heart of what was going on in the church in Corinth and the problem in Corinth. It is their worldliness. In other words, what they've done, and we've seen this over the last few weeks, we'll continue to see it throughout the whole letter, is they've taken the values of the world, the things that Corinthian society valued and prized and treasured and thought were important, they've dressed them up in spiritual clothes and they've called the results Christianity.

You can see that, I think, in the three pairs of contrasts. I wonder if you noticed them as Lizzie read the verses. The three pairs of contrasts in verses one to four, notice there are those who are spiritual as opposed to those who are fleshly or worldly.

There are those who are mature as opposed to those who think they are, those who are infants, and there are those who share God's way of thinking as opposed to those who think in merely a human way.

And with each of those three pairs, the Corinthians fall very definitely on the wrong side. One of the ways you know someone is still a child is in their desire to be a grown-up.

So the four-year-old wants to go to school like the little boy next door. The seven-year-old enjoys dressing up in mummy's clothes. The 12-year-old resents parental interference.

[9 : 35] I'm no longer in nappies. I can make my own decisions. We won't talk about 16-year-olds for fear of embarrassment. The church in Corinth made much of their maturity and wisdom.

They think they are spiritual grown-ups, but, says the Apostle Paul, they are worldly, not spiritual. They are infantile, not adult.

They are barely Christian in the way in which they think. The evidence, notice verse 2, is in their diet.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it, and even now you're not ready. But also in their attitude to Christian leaders, verse 4.

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? It's just what we saw, isn't it, back in chapter 1. Their attitude guided by secular thinking and secular norms in terms of the way in which they think about Christian leadership and different leaders. [10:43] And it's that particular issue that Paul now tackles in chapters 3 to 4. In other words, you see, we mustn't read 1 Corinthians, and for those who are just visiting today or who are new to Grace Church, then 1 Corinthians is our book of the year this year, both in our Bible study groups and also mainly on Sundays.

We mustn't read 1 Corinthians and think, well, this is what a church should look like, as if 1 Corinthians gives us a blueprint, a model church, so to speak, which all subsequent churches should follow.

No, it's not a blueprint. It's a warning. It shows us what a worldly church looks like, which means that the temptations the church in 1st century Corinth faced are very much the temptations that a church in 21st century London will face as well.

After all, both cities, they're so similar. Both cities big, impressive, culturally powerful, wealthy, full of successful, driven people.

And therefore, you see the pressure on the church, which, by comparison, feels so small and unimpressive and so insignificant. The pressure on the church to think, well, if only we became more like the world, then people might listen to us.

[12:09] They might take us seriously the temptation to be worldly. And I take it that is probably one of the greatest temptations of a church in London and perhaps especially in a place like Dulwich, full of powerful, impressive people.

So easy for the church to want to be the same. Well, so far in chapter 1, verses 18 to 216, Paul has tackled the temptation to change the message to something which sounds less foolish in the eyes of the world and more acceptable to the world.

And now in chapter 3 and 4, Paul addresses the temptation to adopt a form of ministry which looks more impressive, more acceptable and less foolish.

Hence, the next two titles on the sermon outline, wordliness and Christian ministers and wordliness and Christian ministry. Let's have a look at each one in turn.

First of all, wordliness and Christian ministers. Have a look at verses 5 to 9. What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

[13:23] 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 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.

Now I take it that while Paul applies this to himself and Apollos primarily here as church planters and leaders, nonetheless, by extension, there is secondary application here to all those who are in some kind of leadership or who are in some kind of teaching role in the local church or indeed in a CU at school or university or that kind of thing.

I take it it includes Sunday club leaders, jam leaders, growth group leaders, those on the church council, anyone in the local church to whom leadership has been delegated.

but notice too that those who are not in those positions cannot decide to switch off at this point because it's just as much if not more perhaps about how we regard those who are leaders and teachers as it is about how they regard themselves.

[14:49] So I want us to notice Paul's six convictions about genuine gospel ministry. This is the point at which those who have a pen or pencil may have an advantage but perhaps others have better memories than I do.

Six convictions about genuine gospel ministry. Conviction number one, Christian leaders are servants. Christian leaders are servants. Verse five, what then is Apollos?

What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed. Verse seven, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything.

Leaders are nothing. We had that reading from Acts chapter 18 just after Paul has left Corinth where Apollos is introduced and he's described, isn't he, in very humanly impressive terms.

Eloquent, competent in the scriptures, fervent in spirit, speaking boldly, powerfully refuting his opponents in public. but he is just a servant.

[15 : 57] You see, Paul completely turns the whole value system of Corinth completely upside down and on its head. Here is Corinth, this elitist Roman colony where social prestige and status were paramount.

But, says Paul, I'm just a servant. in Downton Abbey terms, I'm not one of the upstairs people, I'm one of the downstairs people, a despised manual labourer.

In other words, Christian leaders are not people to be, they're not heroes to be followed. We're not to sort of big up our leaders and give them special titles and places of honour and status, the very things we so easily do.

Second conviction, God is the Lord of gospel ministry. God is the Lord of gospel ministry. Verse five again, what then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom he believed as the Lord assigns to each.

He is the Lord who directs the work of those who serve him. Like a foreman on a building site, he assigns the work that different people are going to do.

[17 : 11] In other words, their effectiveness is not due to their own innate abilities. Is the person preaching the sermon to adults any greater than the person teaching the Bible in Sunday Club to six-year-olds?

No. God has simply assigned different work for them to do. Conviction three, Christian leaders should therefore be united in purpose and recognize their different gifts and the different tasks they have been given.

They're not in competition. Verse eight, they are to regard themselves as one. Verse six, one plants, one waters.

All have one purpose. Verse nine, they are fellow workers. No Christian leader has all the gifts. gifts. We all need each other's gifts, which means that we must repent when we compare ourselves with others.

So easy to do that, isn't it, to compare ourselves with one another? We need to repent of the pride judgmentalism that easily and we need to do it. Conviction four, growth and success in Christian ministry come from God alone.

[18 : 31] I wonder if you spotted the repetition. Verse six, God gave the growth. Verse seven, only God gives the growth.

Imagine that next Saturday you're wandering around the Tate Modern and there's a particularly striking picture that catches your eye or perhaps since this is the Tate Modern, it's an artistically arranged pile of bricks on the floor.

But you see this picture. Now, you don't spend too long, do you? I take it, thinking how marvelous. I wonder what make of brush the painter used or what make of paint the painter used.

No, you don't want to give the attention, the honor, the glory, if you like, to the make of brush or the make of paint, but rather to the artist.

Instead, you praise the artist, not the tools the artist uses. Similarly, you don't praise the church leader when there's growth. You praise the God who gives the growth.

[19 : 37] So by all means, thank Andy for the way in which he oversees Sunday Club and Jam, but give the praise to God. By all means, thank your growth group leader for serving you through the year, but give the praise to God.

Conviction five, churches belong neither to Paul nor to Apollos nor any other leader, but only to God. Verse nine, for you are God's fellow workers, you are God's fields, God's building.

We mustn't put Christian leaders and Christian ministers up on a pedestal in any way and certainly not in a way that detracts from the fact that God is the one who is in charge and it's his work.

Grace Church does not belong to Simon Dowdy, God forbid, or anyone else. Conviction six, God alone defines what is success or failure in Christian ministry.

Verse eight, he who plants and he who waters are one and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

[20 : 49] Now we're not told here what the wages are. We are told in chapter four, verse five, that the commendation is received on the final day. Chapter four, verse five, then each will receive his commendation from God.

It may be the joy perhaps of seeing the fruit of their ministry on the final judgment day in the new creation. I think the point is really that they will be rewarded by the Lord.

That is the one to whom they are told to look for their reward. In other words, we mustn't encourage our leaders to look for reward now, whether it's being well regarded or respected as an upright member of the community, as a respectable community leader or for being a wonderful person or the rewards measured in a whole host of ways, whether it's growing numbers or growing budget or whatever it is, success in other ways.

Those things can all too easy lead to either the message being changed or toned down. Perhaps because of pressure from inside the church or from pressure outside the church to gain the approval of others.

God alone defines success. It is his verdict that matters, not the verdict of the outside world. It is his verdict that matters. So six convictions, six ways in which the church will be tempted to have a worldly view of Christian leaders.

[22 : 16] Secondly, worldliness and Christian ministry. Have a look at verse 16. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?

Paul now shifts from an agricultural metaphor to an architectural one. And the point is that all of us are responsible before God for how we build Grace Church.

Now I think one of the very striking things about this chapter, indeed the whole letter, is that it is addressed to the church in Corinth as a whole. You see, you might expect, mightn't you, that when you come to the bid on Christian leadership that Paul would take to one side those who are involved in leadership, who are teaching the Bible in a whole variety of ways, and he'd say, look, this bid is for you and everyone else you can just kind of switch off while I'm teaching the leaders this.

But he doesn't do that. It is all focused on the whole church in Corinth because Paul knows, you see, the enormous influence for good or for ill that a whole church has on the shape of the ministry. We all exert influence because we all have expectations about what a church should be like. But it's all too easy to be worldly in our thinking and worldly in our expectations about church, and therefore, the whole church, you see, needs to be addressed.

[23 : 34] Now, imagine I told you that we'd been house hunting. We haven't, but imagine I told you we had, and there was a particular property that we had set our hearts on that it boasted a designer kitchen, oak flooring with underfloor heating, the latest colors from the Farrow and Ball paint palette.

But then if I went on to say that actually the survey was a complete shocker, and it seemed that the smart new extension, which had been put on the back with the bifold doors, in fact, was barely attached to the rest of the property.

Now, I'd like to think you might show me some sympathy, but I guess you probably wouldn't be surprised, because we all know, don't we, that cowboy builders exist, and I guess many of us have had the experience of cowboy builders.

And Paul wants us to know, God wants us to know, that cowboy church builders also exist. You see, churches make choices about the kind of church they're going to be.

And it's all too easy to build in a worldly way that looks impressive, but is in fact a complete disaster. And therefore, there are two things we need to look out for.

[24 : 53] First of all, we've got to check the foundations. Verse 10. 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, for no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. What makes a church a church?

It is the foundation that's laid. The local church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the foundation. In particular, it is the foundation of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It's exactly what we've seen, isn't it, throughout this letter so far of 1 Corinthians. The message of the cross, of Jesus Christ who died in our place for the forgiveness of sins, such that those who trust in him can be confident of forgiveness and life with God now, but also in the new creation as well.

Foundations, verse 10, which the apostles laid, as we saw last week in chapter 2, how the Spirit taught the apostles so that when they then came to write the New Testament, what they wrote was precisely what God wanted them to write.

[26 : 07] And therefore, we see the responsibility of all Christian churches, of all Christian leaders, is to build on those foundations. Indeed, says Paul, verse 11, no one can lay any other foundation.

Now, I guess his point there is that, yes, in a sense, you could lay another foundation, but you wouldn't then be building church. So, for example, we could build Grace Church, couldn't we, as a whole variety of different things.

We could build Grace Church as a social network, a good place to meet people and make friends. We could build Grace Church based on morality, a sort of haven for a respectable, clean living people in a world that has gone to the dogs.

We could build Grace Church as a center of spirituality where you can come and get in touch with your kind of, the sort of spiritual side of yourself. We could build Grace Church on a foundation which simply cuts and pastes the Bible, which leaves out all the uncomfortable stuff, which dismisses the Apostle Paul and just tells people what they want to hear.

Peddling false hope and comfort to those who want to be soothed and affirmed in the knowledge that actually they needn't change and that everything is okay. But what is Paul saying?

[27 : 26] The result would not be church. They might meet in a church building. The leader might wear religious clothes.

They may sing Christian songs. Those who attend may feel blessed. They may even feel they've had a wonderful spiritual experience.

church. But it's not church because the foundations are wrong. It is not built on the teaching of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the apostles.

Check the foundations. But check the building materials as well. Verse 12. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest for the day will disclose it because it will be revealed with 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.

[28 : 42] fire. What's the key question? Will the building last? Notice it's not the opinion of the sophisticated, impressive, powerful Corinthian society that matters.

It's not the verdict of the Twittersphere that matters, but the opinion of Jesus Christ. In the first century, fire was a constant threat in the cities of the Mediterranean, and it's fire that so often the Lord Jesus himself used to describe the final judgment day.

You see, Paul is warning of the possibility of building in such a way that the work won't survive.

They themselves will get to heaven, but notice verse 15, only by the skin of their teeth.

It's a shocking verse, isn't it? A shocking verse. It sounds as if this person in verse 15 is a genuine Christian. It's why they are saved from the fire.

But the ministry they built will be destroyed. Because on the judgment day, only a ministry which is focused on and centered on and true to Jesus Christ crucified will actually stand.

[29 : 56] And it's his assessment of the work that counts. Not how wonderful we think we're doing, not how wonderful others think we're doing, but his assessment of the work that counts.

in other words, you see, it's quite possible to build an apparently very successful ministry, but actually for it to be a thin veneer with no deep spiritual reality.

People may feel helped, people may enjoy the singing, they may serve on committees, they may teach in Sunday school, they may bring friends, they may raise funds and bring money in. but not really know Jesus Christ for themselves at all.

A ministry which may look good in the eyes of the culture, but which is destroyed on the final day. Finally, verses 16 and 17.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

[31 : 08] For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. A dire warning perhaps to anyone, not just those in leadership in the church in Corinth, who by their actions actually destroy the church.

Now, that may be the factionalism in Corinth. It could be a whole host of other things. It is a warning to those through whom they come, unlike those in verse 15, there's not even the hope of escaping by the skin of their teeth.

Check the foundations. Check the building materials. Not all churches are the same. In fact, the most significant differences between churches lie not in the superficial things which we so often look at.

We so often notice superficial differences between churches, the kind of building they meet in, the style of the songs and the music, what the minister wears, whether it's formal, whether it's informal. But actually the really significant differences run far, far deeper than those superficial things. The fundamental non-negotiable without which the church is no longer the church is the foolish, unimpressive, weak message of Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins.

[32 : 34] to build a church on that gospel is to build a solid, movable, permanent structure that will last to eternity.

To build anything else is to build with wood, hay, or straw. Paul. Now it seems to me that at this point it would be very easy to start finger wagging and to point the finger at others.

Sadly, the Church of England prides itself on its theological breadth. Many Church of England churches are barely Christian. But I want us to see that Paul is writing to a church that is the genuine article.

Chapter 3 verse 1, he addresses them as brothers, as he does throughout the letter. Brothers. And therefore, first and foremost, we need to examine the kind of structure that we are building here at Grace Church.

God warns us of the danger, you see, of applying the world's thinking to Christian leadership and Christian ministry, wanting to look good in the eyes of the world, such that we change the message or distort the gospel, such that we puff up our leaders and want impressive leaders and lose the focus on God himself who gives the growth.

[33 : 57] Well, let's pray together. Each one's work will become manifest, it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much indeed that you don't simply leave it to us to work out the best way to do Christian ministry, the best way to grow the local church, what a local church should be.

Thank you for the fact that there will be a day of assessment. And we pray, Heavenly Father, very much that you would guard us from worldliness. Please help us as a local church to have you at the center of all that we do, to be building on the foundation and with the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

please convict us of where we are worldly and bring us to our senses. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.