

"For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field"

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[0:00] We continue in our study through the first epistle to the Corinthians and we are in chapter 3 this morning.

We are going to be in verses 1 to 9. It is page 1132 of your pew Bible. I encourage you to open your Bibles and follow along. And if you remember that at the introduction of this letter, when we began this series, we talked about how Paul had alluded to the state of division and quarreling in the Corinthian church.

He started talking about that in the opening of his letter. But then he goes away from talking about it and then about presenting the case of division.

He goes away from that to talk about the cross and about wisdom in the rest of chapter 1 and in all of chapter 2. In doing so, Paul is setting, he's not going off on a tangent, rather he wants the Corinthians to see that the church itself has left the cross.

They've bypassed the cross. They've left it as the power of God. They've forsaken the wisdom of God for that of the world. They've placed the church and the gospel in jeopardy by doing so. And that's what Paul wants to highlight to them.

[1:28] He wants them to see that the consequences of their pursuit of worldliness, rather than the message of the cross, is the division, is the cause of the division that is now spreading among them.

So we left off last week in chapter 2 with Paul explaining that there are two kinds of people. The natural person and the spiritual person. Do you remember that?

Bendik? Bendik? Bendik or Jatayah? Put that off your face, please. We're in church. Listen. Pay attention. Thank you. Sorry.

So, we left off last week in chapter 2 with Paul. Bendik? Bendik? Sit down, buddy. Okay. Okay. Sorry.

We left off last week in chapter 2 with Paul explaining that there are two kinds of people. Do you remember that?

[2:38] The natural person and the spiritual person. If you remember that the natural person is one who is unable to understand the things of God. And therefore, he cannot accept the things of the Spirit of God.

Because he cannot understand it. For they are folly to him. Paul says, he tells us that in chapter 2 verse 14. He's unable to understand them because they're spiritually discerned. And he doesn't have the Spirit.

But the spiritual person is one who, as Paul has told us at the end of chapter 2, has the mind of Christ. Such a person has from the Holy Spirit the ability to judge all things.

And to determine the godly sin-denying and Christ-exalting path forward. That's the spiritual person. And those who are people of the Spirit, Paul reminds us, are formed by the mind of Christ. Now, if you remember chapter 2 verse 16, Paul says that all who have Christ, all who have Christ as Savior, have been bestowed with the Holy Spirit, and therefore have the mind of Christ.

[3:57] Why then will Paul then go on to say in verse 1 of this chapter, that why would he say to these Corinthian Christians that they are fleshly?

That they are not spiritual? Is Paul contradicting himself? And by the way, just so we're clear, Paul recognizes that these church, the Corinthians that he's writing to, are in fact Christians.

Christians. That fact is not in doubt. Paul, I refer to them numerous times now, as brothers and sisters in Christ. But, the problem is that these Corinthian Christians, they started to use the word

teleos.

They refer to themselves as complete, mature in Christ. But, Paul wants them to know that they are, in fact, infants. Babies in diapers.

So, Paul in chapter 3 and in chapter 4, will show what it really means to be a spiritual Christian, and why he could not refer to these Corinthian Christians as spiritual.

[5:05] Paul isn't being harsh here. Rather, he's being truthful. He says to them, I, for my part, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

Now, one may ask if Paul is contradicting himself. We already said that he's not. Rather, what he's doing here is using their own language and their own meaning to show them where they really are. They would thought of themselves as super-spirituals. Paul wants to show them that they are actually, in fact, infants who have yet to graduate from drinking milk.

He says to them, verse 2, I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now, even now, you were not ready, for you were still of the flesh.

Now, he's not saying that they are, remember chapter 3, he's not saying that they are natural men who are unable to understand the things of God. They have the minds of Christ.

[6:18] They're able to know the things of God. But what is going on here is that their life and their Christian walk is characterized by the flesh.

they do, in fact, have the minds of Christ, but they've decided not to use it. And what results is a tragic childishness.

You know, we all love our children. I've just shown you some of the growing pains of mine. You just got some eyewitness to that.

But we all love our children, don't we? And we parent them. And as you parent and you parent your child, there are different times, there are different stages that, depending on you and the parent, the mom or the dad, that is your favorite period.

All right? In this stage of development, isn't there? One particular stage that I love with my children is when they are coming out of being toddlers and they're in the preschool age.

[7:26] But even as much as I love that stage of the development, I do not desire for them to stay at that stage forever. I want them to continue to mature.

So it is in the spiritual realm. Stunted growth is tragic. Stunted growth is worrying. And Paul is saying here to these Corinthians, you are stunted.

In this case, your childishness and worldliness, they are synonyms of each other, is worrying and tragic. Because the reports that Paul had heard about them and from them of their divisiveness has made it clear to him that they are indeed, he used this word psychikos, which means fleshly.

They have the mind of Christ, but they are fleshly in their worldly, in their outlook. When there is quarreling and jealousy among you, when you are preoccupied with power and status, when all these things are evident in your midst, Paul asks them, are you not of the flesh and behaving in a human way when you are building factions?

One saying, I follow Paul and another saying, I follow Apollos. Are you not being merely human? Are you not reflecting the world's values and behaving as people without the spirit?

[9:03] it is a merely human way and we are to respect that. We are to respect that human behavior in the world. But when such childishness is rampant, even in the church of Christ, it will destroy the church.

Of course, as we have been saying, this is the Corinthian problem. And this Corinthian problem is not limited to first century Corinth, is it?

It is present in our age. It is present in our day. It even threatens us here, even at Holy Trinity.

That's why we must listen to Apostle Paul's words closely and carefully, asking God to do the work of healing among us.

And what is it? What is it that makes the Corinthian problem such a persistent problem? what is it that gives it the potential to destroy churches?

Us not being exempted. It's because the problem, it persists when the church rejects the essential message of the cross.

[10:17] The message that we are all, all of us, without exception, we are all sinners, rebels against God, deserving nothing. yet bestowed with mercy and grace, adopted into Christ's family, welcomed into the family of God as sons and daughters.

That's the gospel message. You deserve nothing. In fact, all you deserve is judgment and damnation and God's wrath. For instance, you have mercy and you have grace and you have love and you've been welcomed into the family of God, given the Holy Spirit.

all of us are in that category. When we recognize that we are in Christ, and the fact that we are in Christ is solely because of God's grace, not anything inherently good or worthy in us.

That is the message of the cross. Christ bringing us all together from different backgrounds. He himself constituting us as a family by his shed blood.

That's what unites us, not because we happen to share the same hobbies or we have the same sort of political ideology or we have the same philosophy about raising kids or we're homeschoolers or we send our kids to public school.

[11:49] That is not what unites us. Christ Jesus and his shed blood is what binds us together from every nation and tribe. And that's the gospel that the Corinthians have forgotten.

And when we forget that as well, this childishness seeps in. When we fail to see that it is all of grace, with no room for boasting, when we forget to see that, it's so easy then to become prideful. And with pride comes envy and jealousy and self-glory. You know, when you start to boast in your spiritual gifts, the key word being gifts, not earned, gifts, but when you start to boast in that which is given freely by God, and you start to make the God-given wisdom, something you've discovered on your own, you're showing that you are indeed not spiritual.

That's what Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians. You're showing that you indeed, although you have the mind of Christ, you're not employing the mind of Christ. When a church refuses to be ruled by the spirit-inspired word of God, and instead employs the foolish wisdom of the world, when the church does that, they're showing that the gospel among them is under threat.

threat. When the truth of God's word is secondary to our feelings and emotions, when the fear of man weighs more on us than the fear of God, when we insist that we know better, and we refuse to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ in the church, that all these are signs that we are not living by gospel standards.

[13:45] the cross and the message of the crucified Messiah is not at the center of our gospel. It shows that we are starting to prioritize ourselves and our wills over being crucified with Christ.

So these are the reasons why Paul says to them, you are people of the flesh. You're moved by carnal desires, rather than being people of the spirit, who are reflecting the mind of Christ and his character.

And I imagine in a church like the one in Corinth, it's easy upon hearing Paul write this letter, it's easy for them to immediately think of others.

You know, there's already factions between them, so they're probably thinking as they hear Paul's letter, yeah, he's talking about that person. It's easy to fall into that, to start thinking about others as we hear Paul say these things, to think that others are at fault.

But I think that that is, to even think that and to persist in that, is to continue in the spirit of childishness and carnality. Instead, we will do better if each one of us, each one of us place ourselves under the spirit's microscope.

[15:08] And in the words of the psalmist, if we will all together say, search me, O God, and know my heart, try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there's any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

That should be our prayer, as we sit on the Paul's teaching here. And then we must then come together as a church, and commit to placing the cross of Christ at the center, as we relate to one another.

Let me tell you a secret. I'm sure you know it already. We are not always going to agree with one another in the church.

The fact that we have the mind of Christ doesn't mean that we will agree on everything. Paul, after all, notice here that Paul is not rebuking them for disagreeing with one another.

He's rebuking them for division and quarreling. Those are two distinct things. In other words, Paul is saying it's how we deal with disagreements amongst ourselves that shows whether we are indeed people of the spirit or carnal or fleshly people.

[16:39] When we push our own self-centered desires on others, it shows that we are not walking according to the cross-centered gospel of Jesus Christ.

Worldliness, worldliness with all its self-centered childish traits is incompatible with a spirit-filled cross-centered Christianity.

That's what Paul then continues in verse 5-9. He continues to show how a spirit-filled Christian's life is demonstrated by self-giving and a servant attitude.

He writes to a church which prides itself by building factions and priding itself on the factions they belong to. To a church that acts on its own righteousness before God that thinks it's as if she to a church that thinks that they are in of themselves have a right standing before God without the grace of God.

Paul reminds them. He reminds them. He has already done so in chapter 1 but now he reminds them again in verse 5. What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

[18:09] Mere servants. Mere servants through whom you believe the gospel message as the Lord assigned to each of us. Mere servants.

The Corinthian church was a boastful church. It seems that they find all sorts of things to boast about and consequently to divide over.

They boast over what they know and what they did and where they're located. Instead of remembering that in Christ all human boasting is nullified.

They even boast about their leaders. for Paul wants to remind them and us that the Christians should repeat these words of Apostle Paul in Galatians 6.

May it never be that I would boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

[19:18] That's the only ground of our boasting. And again this is why it's so dangerous and foolish to be like the Corinthians.

Because they thought that they could move past the cross and every time we think that the cross is just basic and we can go beyond that. We're mature. We're complete. Paul says to them and he says to us, be careful.

There are no VIPs in Christ's church. In other words, he will tell us later on as we go on in 1 Corinthians that we are all VIPs in Christ's church.

But in this vein he's trying to say there's no tiers of importance in Christ's church. No one is indispensable.

There are no celebrities to whom we must follow around like fans. There are but servants. That's all we are, all of us. And he again uses himself and Apollos as an example.

[20:29] Against those who make too much of Christian ministers, Paul has something to say. He says to them, we're just servants. It is the Lord who gives them their marching orders.

It's Jesus Christ who is the captain. He is the Lord. If you were, for those of you who were at Synod two years ago, we had a pastor from England, Bishop Lee McNunn, who spoke and led and preached during the Synod.

And he used this analogy to describe gospel ministers. He says all a gospel minister is, is a table waiter. And it's a great analogy and I'm stealing it this morning.

It's all we are as ministers of the gospel are table waiters. We don't cook it, the food for God's people.

It is God's, God is the, he's the chef, he's the architect, he's the designer. All the minister of gospel is to take what God has given as food for his people to bring it to them.

[21:46] We're servants. Servants. Paul is saying to them. The cross shapes the gospel proclamation.

Paul has been saying that all along. The cross shapes our gospel proclamation. But it also serves as the model for our gospel ministry. And you know this is opposite, diametrically opposed to the worldly view of leadership.

Christ our Lord himself comes among us as one who serves. And we are to follow his example. We do not lord it over those in our care.

as leaders of the world do. In Christ's church, leadership takes the form of servanthood. That's the pattern that Jesus Christ has set.

And it is his church. And he set that pattern for us to follow. This is the pattern I am to follow as your pastor. pastor. This is the pattern the wardens and the vestry members are to follow.

[23:03] This is the pattern every ministry head or Bible study leader is to follow in this church. All of us, all of us, in any capacity in which we serve, we serve in Christ's church.

And we are to serve as servants. We are to see ourselves as servants. But to whom do we answer to if we are servants?

And who do we serve? Let's look at the first. Who do we answer to? Now, I as your pastor answer to Jesus Christ.

You, as a worker in God's vineyard, answer to Jesus Christ. Notice, there at the end of verse 5. It is him who hath assigned the roles.

He's the captain. He gives the marching orders. Of course, you conducted a search party when you were looking for a rector. You called me here.

[24 : 12] Of course, we vote for our wardens and vestry members. But Paul is saying, it is the Lord in his providence who appoints.

Christ. It is his providential will. It is by his providential will that these people are serving in the church of Christ.

And it's so, it is Jesus Christ himself that they must firstly, foremost, answer to. Have you wondered how this might shape our service in Christ's church?

church, if we take this to heart, that our boss is Jesus Christ himself? Think about it. I think if we grasp this truth, it will make us humble.

It will make us grateful. And it will make us bold. It will make us humble because we have all been counted worthy to be a vessel of use in God's hand.

[25 : 12] Who are we after all? And yet God has counted us worthy to be used. And it will make us grateful because it is not because of any inherent merit in you or me.

It is by grace that we've been called. And it will make us bold in the face of human resistance. It emboldens you to say, it emboldens all of us to say, as the apostles did in Acts, we must and we will obey God rather than men.

You know, the fear of man is what keeps us sometimes from faithful service. But if we know that the one who calls us and to whom we must answer is God himself, I think he would help us to be firm in the face of opposition.

God is giving. And let's note verse 6 and 7 as Paul continues here. He's giving, he's laying what it looks like to be a servant in God's vineyard.

He says, 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.

[26 : 34] Now in this garden analogy, Paul and Apollos job is important. I want you to see that. He's not saying that our job isn't important. It is important.

One planted and the other watered. Note the tense though. Do you see the tense? Planted and watered. God himself appointed them for a time and a place to do the work in his field.

They've done the job God appointed for them to do. In reality, in actual reality, Paul came to them and preached among them for about 18 months. And then he left and moved on in his ministry.

And Apollos came after Paul to Corinth and continued to teach the Corinthian church to have them to grow in sanctification and Christian maturity. So he watered where Paul had already started to plant, where Paul had planted.

he comes along and watered, ministering to the people for even a shorter duration than when Paul was there. But notice that Paul uses past tense in describing their work.

[27 : 48] Important though it is. And how does he describe what God does? He says that God is the one who is indispensable.

indispensable. Although Paul and Apollos are tending the same field, Ewu plants and Ewu waters are one. And their job is important, we say that, and I want to emphasize that again, their job is important.

Every job, every work we do in the household of God is important. There is no unimportant work. But, none of us are indispensable.

God used Paul and Apollos at a time, and then he called them to another work. But who is indispensable in this analogy that Paul is using?

Who is indispensable? God, Jesus Christ, yes, God. It is he who gives the growth. It is he who gives the growth.

[28 : 55] In fact, the tense there that Paul uses is an ongoing action. So, he's saying, I planted, Apollos came along and watered, but it is God who keeps on growing.

God's work is continuing and active and present in us. He is the one that's indispensable. He gives, he gives, he does the ongoing work and action.

So, the point is clear. So, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Gospel labor is useless if God does not bless it and make it fruitful among us. That's why all the glory belongs to him.

That's also why we don't put our confidence in servants. For we put our confidence in the Lord who makes things grow. A spiritually mature church glories in and places our confidence in Christ and his promises alone, not in our pastors or any other worker in the church.

[30:14] Here worship in the church is a sign of worldliness. Paul is trying to show us. Ewu plants and Ewu waters are one and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Verse 8 Not only is there common purpose with all of us as we work in God's house, in God's vineyard, in God's field, there's common purpose when we do gospel work because we're doing it in service of one master.

But Paul tells us there's also reward. Each will receive his wages according to his labor. And then notice here that we are laborers.

Do you see that? We're laborers. We're not co-investors. We're all grunts. All of us. We're not partners with corner offices.

We're all servants, laborers, day laborers. It's not like the business world where some are laborers and others are in the managerial class.

[31:21] And others are CEOs. Paul here is saying, for one, I hope this helps you to see that the church is not a business, by the way.

We must not think of the church in the way we think of businesses in the world. We must not operate like we do as Fortune 500 companies. It will not work.

And when you see pastors that start to act like CEOs, it should trouble you. But more importantly, whatever work you do, Paul is trying to tell us, you do it unto the Lord.

None of us can say, well, I've been working so hard and I've made partner. And now I can claim part ownership in this place.

none of us can say that. We have no grounds to say that. There is no such thing in the church of Christ. We are laborers working for one master, one owner, and he does not share ownership.

[32:31] The Lord Jesus Christ, it is his blood and his alone that has purchased us. We serve when we do where God places us to serve.

And we do so faithfully, relying on his spirit to empower, enable, and sustain us. But do not fear, brothers and sisters, your labor is not in vain.

That's also wonderful to know. Each will receive his wages according to his labor, Paul tells us. I'm so glad that Paul did not say, each will receive his wages according to the growth, or according to the harvest, or according to the return on investment.

No, that's not what Paul is saying here. It is each according to his labor that we will receive our reward. Why is that comforting, you may ask?

Because all that God is asking of us is our faithfulness. It's our faithfulness. He is the one who, according to Jeremiah, examines the mind and tests the heart to give to each according to his way, according to what his actions deserve.

[33:52] And that's wonderful to know. God knows and God sees and knows our motives, and he will reward us accordingly. We'll speak more on that next week, God willing.

But Paul wants to show us we are all laborers. But he also wants to say against those who will make too little of Christian workers, of Christian work.

Because interestingly, that's what the Corinthians are doing. They're over-exalting their leaders, and at the same time, they're making too little of them when they disagree with them.

But look there in verse 9. Paul wants us to see that all are God's fellow workers. the importance is because we are all on one team, working for one master.

He's the one who has called us to the work. And the work is his work. And that's what makes the work important. Because of the one who calls us to it.

[34:56] And it is his field, and it's his building. And we are all working for the one who calls us. all of us.

Co-workers, under God. There are no partners. There is no cushy corner office. There is no grunts just in cubicles.

We're all laborers. We're all grunts. Although we have diverse tasks and different roles, there is only one owner.

Leaders don't own the church. Whether they're the local clergy or the bishop, they don't own the church. Members don't own the church either.

It is Christ's church. Our work is important because of the one who calls us to it. But we ourselves are not indispensable.

[36:00] Only God is. we are merely servants, Paul is telling us. Day laborers in the service of our master. So then, when we start to think of our ministry or our position as this is my pulpit or this is my ministry or this is my position this is my church we are starting to think in wordly terms, we are being childish.

That is what Paul is trying to show. And if that thought and that actions and that behavior becomes rampant and is allowed to fester among us it will poison growth in the church.

It will poison growth in any church. And so how are we to see ourselves? First, we must see ourselves as people who have the mind of Christ and we must employ that mind of Christ so that we can grow in Christian maturity and not remain as infants.

And secondly, we must see ourselves as servants, all of us, co-laborers under God working for one master and for one purpose. And as we do so, may we realize truly that we are God's fellow workers and you, you, all of us are God's field.

We are God's building. Amen.