

Humble Service

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[0 : 00] Well friends, great to see you here tonight. Now I've had quite a good week trying to understand this passage. It's not an easy passage, so hopefully at the end of it you might understand it, because I think I finally understand it.

But how about we pray? And since you've been sitting for a while, why don't we all stand and we'll pray. Father God, thank you so much for your word.

Thank you for your word who is the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for the word of scripture that points to him. And Father, we pray tonight that you'd help us to understand this word and that you'd help us to see its relevance for our lives and that you'd be at work in us by your spirit to help us to live it.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down. Now the other day I found a website that I liked. I liked it because it tapped into my own feelings.

The website is called I Hate Performance Reviews. Now there are probably some of you here who might identify with me. You see, in the world of business and much of the workplace these days, performance reviews have become part of life.

[1 : 14] They're even part of the academic world. The church is getting into them. Theological colleges are getting into them. They started doing them when I was at Ridley. So let me tell you briefly what they are. Now most of you will know, but I'll tell you those of you who don't.

And performance reviews generally happen on a yearly basis. They are a time when a manager or a supervisor formally or informally judges your work performance for a particular period of time. Now if you do well in it, you might get a raise or a promotion or a pat on the back or something. If you don't do so well, well you might be encouraged to correct areas in which you fall short.

And if it goes on for too long that these are not corrected, well, there may be some ramifications you don't like. It's a way of providing feedback to you. Now I don't like them very much and I'm not sure why.

Perhaps I feel they're a threat to me. Perhaps I don't like being corrected. Perhaps I never like the whole school reporting thing. And performance reviews look a little bit like a grading system from school, except that you generally don't get a mark at the end.

[2 : 18] Or perhaps I'm just arrogant and I need to be a bit more humble and need to learn.

Anyway, I don't like them. However, I must say that some sort of self-evaluation, I think, is a good thing.

I think being able to self-evaluate is a grand thing to be doing. I do it all the time, perhaps too much. It's helpful to take a long, hard look at who you are and how you're going in a whole lot of areas in life.

And I think it's helpful for us as Christians. Now, if I was designing a sort of self-evaluation tool for ministers and their congregations, I reckon 1 Corinthians 3 would be a good place to start.

It's a great chapter. I think 1 Corinthians 3 provides some good criteria for evaluating congregations and for evaluating God's ministers. So that's what we're going to do tonight.

We're going to check out 1 Corinthians 3 and we're going to see what advice God gives about how we might evaluate ourselves and, if I can put it this way, how you might evaluate Mark and me and the other staff here at Holy Trinity.

[3 : 21] At the end, I'm going to tell you some areas where we, I think, as contemporary Christians, might be falling short in the sorts of things that are addressed here. So let's get underway. Now, in order to really understand this passage, it is important you understand some terminology that Paul uses.

So if you pick up your outline, you've got to have an outline. Are there people that don't have outlines or access to them? Put up your hand and someone will try and find one for you. But you'll need to look on.

Have a look at it with me. So open up. And the middle page is the one you want, the one that says some terminology stuff, okay, some terms. Okay, I want to go through some terms that occur in chapter 3 and the surrounding chapters.

First of all, Paul in chapter 2 verse 6 talks about the mature. Now, in Corinthians and elsewhere, a mature person is a person of wisdom, a knowledgeable, discerning, experienced Christian. Wisdom. Used in chapter 2 verse 6, 7 and so on. Wisdom is not equal to the gospel. Which is for everyone. But it is something that's seen among the mature.

[4 : 33] The mature are wise. Another way of defining all of this is, it's someone who knows the depths or the deep things of God, the mind of Christ, the message of the cross.

Or someone who's worked really hard at applying what the cross means for all of life. In that sense, it's similar to what we see in Hebrews chapter 5.

That is solid food. Someone who knows solid food, acquainted with solid food, and who by constant use of God's knowledge, have trained themselves to distinguish between good and evil.

Okay. Then there are those who are spiritual. They're mentioned in 2.13, 15, 3.1 and so on. Those who are spiritual in Corinthians, I think, means those who have the spirit. The NIV, unfortunately, uses different words in different places and causes some confusion.

But I think that's what it means. Someone who's spiritual, someone who has the spirit. The unspiritual, well, someone who doesn't have the spirit. Makes sense, doesn't it? So the non-Christian. The worldly.

[5 : 36] And there are a couple of terms for worldly that are used in chapter 3. There is the worldly and the Greek word. Here's a Greek word for you tonight. Sarkinos. They are those who are made of flesh.

Flesh is this stuff. You know, they're made of flesh. And who share the fallen humanity of the ultimate man. Not the ultimate man, but the first man, Adam.

They're vulnerable to sin. By implication, they're weakened baby Christians who are unaccustomed to walking in or living by the spirit. Infants in Christ.

They are new Christians who have the spirit. Therefore, they're capable of welcoming spiritual truth. They're capable of experiencing growth, even though their experience of it is very little.

And lastly, there's the otherworldly. And see, it's the same word, you know, same English word for two different terms. And this one is the Greek word is sarkikos. They are those who belong to the flesh.

[6 : 35] That is, those who are not only made of flesh. They're not only descendants of Adam. But continue to live like Adam did. By implication, they are willfully rebellious Christians.

Who look like the world around them. And who are concentrated on the self. They're self-centered, self-indulgent, self-sufficient. And they're therefore inviting judgment from God.

So there's my background terms. Okay. Now, let's read verses 1 to 4. See if we can work out what Paul's saying. And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people.

But rather as people of the flesh. Sarkikos. As infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food. For you were not ready for solid food.

Even now, you're still not ready. For you are still of the flesh. Sarkikos. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, you are not of the flesh, Sarkikos, and behaving according to human inclinations.

[7 : 37] Are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one of you says, I belong to Paul. And another, I belong to Apollos. Are you not merely human?

Now, in your outline, I put some little boxes. This is sort of a bit of an interactive thing tonight. With questions about the Corinthians. So you can put one of three markers in the little boxes.

It's a little exercise for you. You can put a tick. Or you can put a cross. Or you can put a question mark. So, I want you to tick the box, cross the box or whatever, in answer to each of these questions about the Corinthians.

From this little passage here, do you think the Corinthians are Christians? Okay. Do you think the Corinthians are Christians? Well, I think yes, you can put a little tick in that box.

They are clearly Christians because they're called the saints in chapter 1, verse 1. And they're called brothers and sisters here. So he thinks they're, you know, fellow Christians. That's the answer to the first one. Second one.

[8 : 41] Are they worldly, fleshly, sarkinos? What do you reckon? Yes, they are, aren't they? Verse 1 says that.

So you can put a tick in that one. Are they mature? Now, that term's not used here, but I reckon you can spot it from here. Are they mature? Well, no, they're not.

Verse 2 sort of indicates that. They're infants and so on. So I reckon you could put a cross in that one. They're not mature. They're not, you know, grown up. Next one. Are they worldly, sarkikos? Well, you say, aren't they? Verse 3 says it twice, just in case you didn't get it the first time. So you can put a tick there. Now, here's the next one. Are they spiritual people? Well, strictly speaking, they must be, mustn't they?

Because remember how spiritual people is defined? You've got the spirit. So, yes, they're spiritual people. So in some sense, you should be putting a tick here. However, look at what Paul says to them in verse 1. I could not speak to you as spiritual people.

[9 : 46] Now, I don't think that means they weren't spiritual people. I think it's that you couldn't talk to them that way because they weren't acting that way. And I reckon what Paul is saying is really shocking here.

You see, the Corinthians are Christians. They have the spirit. They are technically those who are spiritual. And the rest of the letter to the Corinthians says, and they've even got very flashy gifts of the spirit.

They've got all the gifts of the spirit. You know, there's no shortage of spiritual giftedness being exercised. And yet the shocking statement by Paul indicates that despite their great giftedness with the gifts of the spirit, despite their arrogance about what they know of the spirit, he can't address them as even the most basic spiritual Christians having the spirit.

And he can't do this because they are flirting with or living in the realm of the flesh, which is contrary to the spirit. And by doing this, they are inviting judgment from God.

So the big question is this, I think. How does Paul know the Corinthians are, in inverted commas, of the flesh? Sarkikos. How does he know they're of the flesh?

[11 : 00] How does he know they're immature and infants? Well, he knows because they're divided among themselves. There are divisions in this church. He's mentioned in chapter one.

He mentions it again here in verse four. They are spiritual in the sense that they have the spirit. However, they are really infants in the sense that they are all too human in their attitudes and their actions.

In other words, they look like the rest of the world and not like Christians filled with the spirit. They're dividing about things. They're boasting in each other. But they just, well, they look like the world. Friends, I want you to stop right here and reflect on this for a moment. I wonder if you can see what Paul is saying. He is saying that you can tell fleshly Christians by what they do with their leaders. That is, if they exalt them, glory in them, boast in them, make them the prime point of their self-identification, then they are fleshly.

[12 : 07] And friends, if you want some examples, then here's a suggestion. Visit young men, young Christian men, friends of yours who hang around on Facebook and watch them.

Cite preacher after preacher, writer after writer, secondary source after secondary source, and notice the exalting of them. Notice the boasting in them. Notice how self-identification is found in them.

Friends, let me be frank. Our contemporary world, with its internet preachers, its charismatic leaders, its social media, is a nursery for immature and infant Christians. Follow it on Facebook. See what I mean. Please don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong with having heroes and models in the faith. Nothing wrong with it at all. It's entirely biblical. Paul urges people to imitate him, even in this letter.

What does matter? What does matter? is when we do not see our leaders through proper glasses. That is when we don't recognize and assess them properly.

[13 : 14] And of course, that then raises questions. How do you measure the leaders of God's people? How should Christians measure their leaders? How should you measure me? And here the passage helps us.

So look at verses 5 to 17 with me. First, look at verse 5. Paul says, What then is Apollos? What then is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe as the Lord assigned to each. Now, here's the bottom line, I think. God is God. God assigns ministry tasks. God appoints servants to do those ministry tasks.

This is the very first thing to know about a Christian leader. They are a servant. Servants at God's disposal. Now, look at verses 6 to 9. The Corinthians have glamorized their leaders.

They've exalted their leaders. They've boasted in their leaders. And what Paul does is bring them down a peg or two in the Corinthians eyes. He, first of all, does it to himself.

[14:17] He diminishes himself. He is a plow boy, a seed planter, a gardener. Apollos is the water boy. You know, the one who brings the water and puts it on the garden.

They are merely laborers in God's field. The emphasis on God here is striking and powerful. Verse 5, Apollos and Paul are servants.

God is the one who assigns their tasks. Verse 6, Paul plants Apollos' waters. God is the one who gives them growth.

Verse 7, neither plow boy nor water boy are anything. Only God is something. After all, God gives the growth. Verse 8, plow boy and water boy are equal.

God will give them each their individual reward. Can you hear all the references to God here or the implications about God? The leaders are not God.

[15:20] God is God. And Christian leaders are servants and manual laborers. If you are going to exalt in anyone, exalt in the person that ought to be exalted in, i.e. God.

If you exalt in the servants of God, you will inevitably diminish God. Can you hear that? Please hear it. If you exalt in the servants of God, you will inevitably diminish God.

God is the owner of the field. He is the one who gives it growth. Never let God fade into the limelight. So again, if I can give the internet preachers model, it's not their fault.

It's that everyone idolizes them. And you hear everything that they say, but often very little of what God says in scripture. That is in the people who are quoting them.

And God has faded into the limelight. You know, from the limelight. A poor won't have it, you see. And nor must we. By the way, I want you to notice verse 8. The trend with Christians is to reward according to success, isn't it?

[16:28] We give glory according to success, to ability and so on. Not so with God. God rewards according to what? Can you see it there? According to work. This is a common theme throughout the New Testament.

We Christians so often gauge our leaders according to success. Not God. God gauges leaders according to ability and work.

But let's move on to verses 10 to 15. Look at verse 9. Oh, sorry. Look at verse 9 first. Right at the end of the verse, Paul makes a transition. Can you see it there? He's been talking about plow boys and water boys in the field.

And right at the end of the verse, he shifts his imagery. He's moving from fields. And now he's talking about construction sites. The Corinthians, he says, are God's building.

God is the one who's sort of given out a contract for this construction project. And he's serving us the building inspector. Let's take a quick look at what happens in this construction site.

[17:29] First, by the grace of God, Paul lays a foundation. Verse 11 tells us that that foundation was Jesus Christ. Paul explains that a bit more in the letter, a bit more earlier in the letter.

He tells us that the foundations that he put down were the message of the gospel, a message of Christ crucified. Chapter 132 and chapter 2, verse 2.

Paul then explains that others have come along to this construction site, foundation stone laid, which is Christ Jesus, Christ crucified. And others have started building on it. You can see that in verses 10 and 12.

And just as the foundation was the preach message of Jesus. So the building on the foundation is also preaching and instruction, I take it. But look at the language that Paul uses in verse 12.

He talks about the various sorts of materials you might use. Now, I'm really up to all of this, you see, because we've been building and building out there. And I guess time will tell whether we built it with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw.

[18:35] How do you tell? You tell by how long it lasts, basically, don't you? In other words, the quality of the foundation is solid in this church in Corinth.

Others will come along and they'll build with other things on top of this. And they'll come building materials of, perhaps some of them, inferior quality. Some of the materials will endure. Others will not. So how can you tell the quality of what's built? Well, I take it that you can tell the quality of the building material by whether it matches the foundation, whether it goes with the foundation.

You know, whether it's of a similar sort of substance. That is, does it conform to the gospel? Does it conform to God's wisdom? Or is it more in conformity with human wisdom?

No matter what it is, it's going to be tested by fire on the last day. Now, let me tell you, in the ancient world, I think in our modern world, you test the quality of building by earthquakes. But I think in the ancient world, you tested the quality of building by fire.

[19 : 37] You know, if it burned up when your enemies came, it was pretty awful building. Now, this is true for ministry, you see. The fire that will test ministry will be the fire of end time judgment.

And that fire will test and sharp the quality of the work of the builders. There'll be rewards for good quality work. And the bad builders will see their work go up in smoke, even though they themselves will escape.

It's a horrifying prospect, really. Let me tell you, if you love the people of God and you've really not ministered to them properly, and you see at the end of time that the people that you've ministered to don't get in, that's the most terrifying thing for a minister of the gospel.

So, the judgment will be to see the fragility, the frailty, and their judgment will be to see how frail and fragile their work was.

Friends, this passage is a very sobering passage for me, a Christian minister. You see, in the end, God doesn't want good programs. He doesn't want good organization.

[20 : 50] He doesn't want me to, you know, have mastered every last bit of management. He's not after growing churches with good programs, people feeling helped, good services, great activities.

He's no, God is after people coming to know and grow in Jesus, to know Jesus and grow in Jesus. And that will only come through the spirit anointed proclamation of Jesus Christ and him crucified. That's why we go through the scriptures week after week after week, so that we can try and keep ourselves honest in terms of proclaiming Christ. Let's now look at verses 16 and 17.

Analogy shifts again. The building now is a specific building. It becomes the temple of God. And that, of course, is what the Corinthians are. They are God's temple.

Why? Because God's spirit dwells in them. That's what a temple is, a place where God's spirit dwells. And the implications are profound. Look at verse 17. Paul says, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

[21 : 52] For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. Friends, in many ways, there are many ways to destroy God's temple. The builders of 10 to 15 could do it, couldn't they?

And perhaps Paul meant more than that. You see, he doesn't say it. He doesn't say if any builder destroys God's temple, does he? Can you see the difference? He says, if anyone destroys God's temple.

I wonder if he's having a go at the divisiveness of the Corinthians. That is, they're going around exalting their leaders. They've got factions there.

They're competitive. They've got all their petty jealousies. Perhaps they themselves, by their jealousies and competitiveness and factionalism, can destroy God's church.

It wouldn't be the first, it wouldn't be the last church to do that, let me tell you. There are many churches around the world have been destroyed by this very thing. And if that happens, they should remember that God loves his church and will punish those who tear it apart or destroy it.

[22 : 57] By the way, I want you to notice something. I want you to notice who judges the leaders of God's church. It's not the ones who are being led, let me tell you. Nor is it.

No, no, this is God's church. And God gives leadership. And God measures leadership. So at the end of the day, I'm sure, you know, my time will come. And it already sort of starts, you know, when people judge what my ministry is like.

And I do want feedback on my ministry. But in the end, God alone will judge the leaders of his church. And God alone will be the one I have to be accountable to and responsible before.

So let's now move on. And let's look at verses 18 to 23. I think now I'm sort of cheating a bit because next week is meant to be chapter 4.

And I'm going to just encourage upon chapter 4, verses 1 to 5. Because I think verses 18 to 23 and chapter 4, verses 1 to 5 belong together. Both start with, you know, let this happen and so on.

[24 : 02] And they're both about how you regard yourself or regard God's servants. So let's pick it up. And we've already touched on some of these things today. But there's some new things to be added.

Let's have a look at verses 18 to 23. To be wise is to orient yourself around God. Okay, if you want to be wise, what is the beginning of wisdom in the Bible?

It's the fear of the Lord, isn't it? It's to orient yourself around God. That means, if you're Christian, orienting your life around Jesus. And Jesus, let me tell you, is foolishness to the world.

The world thinks Jesus is just foolish stuff. And Paul has made that clear in the earlier chapters. So what does to be wise mean? What implication is being wise going to have?

If being wise means orienting yourself around Jesus, then what are you going to have to be willing to be? A fool in the eyes of the world.

[25 : 04] Because anyone who orients themselves around Jesus is orienting themselves around a foolish idea, according to the world. So that makes you a fool. So that lies behind what Paul is saying, I think, in verses 18 and 19.

And what the Corinthians have been doing is they've been snatching wisdom from the world as a way of working out how they should measure their leaders, how they should judge themselves and so on.

And what Paul has done here is to say, no. I've shown you how to measure your rulers, your leaders. I've shown you how to do it.

You do it by thinking Christianly. And it trounces and confuses the world's wisdom. So says Paul in verse 21, no more boasting about human leaders.

You know, it's just not consistent with Christ. It's not consistent with wisdom. Now, the Corinthians had started off by saying, do you remember in our first week?

[26 : 05] I belong to Paul. I belong to Apollos. I belong to Peter on the really spiritual ones. I belong to Christ. Paul turns that on its head. It is to stop.

Stop boasting in leaders, he says. After all, it is not that you belong to Paul. You belong to Apollos. You belong to Peter. Paul and Apollos, he says, actually belong to you. All things are yours in Christ. God has given everything to you, including your leaders.

They are yours. Now, we're now on to chapter four, verses one to five. And so we're nearly there to wrapping things up. Let me see if I can summarize verses one to five in chapter four.

Verse one. Leaders are servants of Christ. Two. The prime requirement of servants of Christ is trustworthiness and faithfulness.

[27 : 09] It is not charisma. It is not acknowledgement by other people. It is trustworthiness and faithfulness.

Three. And God alone will judge this at the great performance review at the end of time. Okay. God alone will judge this at the great, great performance review at the end of time.

Verse four. And so verse five. Don't get into it yourself. Don't do it yourself. Let God do it. Now, friends, let's now see if we can sort of wrap things up tonight.

I want to return to this idea of performance review and self-evaluation. And on the one hand, we should listen to Paul's final words there, shouldn't we? That is, God is the ultimate judge.

We shouldn't preempt God and his judgment. Nevertheless, we've seen Paul giving us, I think, some helpful tools for evaluating ourselves and our leaders. So how can you evaluate God's leaders?

[28 : 12] God's ministers. I'm really telling you how to evaluate me if you'd like to do it. Let me tell you how infants in Christ or fleshly Christians do it.

Okay. So this is how infants in Christ or fleshly, unspiritual Christians would go about it. They would measure ability, accomplishments, notoriety, qualifications, invitations to speak at things, reputations, the amount of download material of their sermons, the size of their church, the number of church plants, the number of hits on Google.

Friends, it is right to respect and honour your leaders. It is right to imitate their faith.

But it is not right to separate them and distinguish them by pagan and ungodly and foolish criteria. It is not the way to go.

It is not the Christian way to go. No, it is God who gives growth and God who withholds it. It is God who does that. If someone is having a very fruitful ministry, it does not necessarily make them any more godly than the guy or girl who is just struggling away in ministry and doing nothing.

[29 : 37] There is a great story that Don Carson, who has his own fame in this world, tells of his father who laboured for very little fruit for many years of his ministry life.

He's written a book about him. I think it's good that he's written a book about him. I know people like that. I know very faithful ministers who have seen very little fruit but who have been faithful to God. And that is what God will measure. It is God who gives growth. It is God who withholds it. What matters is faithfulness and quality and Christlikeness.

Friends, so if you want to measure me, you can try that out. And I measure myself by those standards. And I don't always come up as well as I would like to.

Let's now turn to ourselves. What does our own evaluation of gospel ministers tell us about ourselves? Can you hear the question? What does our own evaluation of gospel ministers tell us about ourselves?

[30 : 46] Does it tell us, and you alone can answer the question, does it tell us that we have not let the gospel invade our evaluative procedures? Does it tell us that we have not let the gospel affect how we measure people?

Does it tell us that we really are of the flesh more than we are of the spirit? Does it tell us that we are no better than these Corinthians who are mere infants in Christ?

Now, if we come up short in this area, what do we do? Well, we do what Paul wants us to do all the time. What God wants us to do.

We go back to the cross. We go back to the ignominy of the cross. To the shame. To the foolishness. To the foolishness. And we soak it in.

And we let it fill our value system. We let it contradict our world. And we let it transform our attitudes.

[31 : 51] And as we do this, we will become mature. Because that's what mature people do. Let's pray. Father God, in this world which is so performance-based, which is so celebrity-based, which is so like 1 Corinthians, so like this church, please help us to have godly wisdom.

Please help us to ground our attitudes, our value systems in the cross. Not in the media. Not in the internet values.

Not in celebrity statuses. But in the cross. Please transform us. And Father, please transform our church here.

Please give us leaders. Who are cruciform. In their attitude to ministry. Who are faithless. And Father, please make me that.

Please make us all who minister that. And Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.