

1 Corinthians 13 (Ordination)

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[0 : 00] My name is David Short and I work on staff here at St. John's and if you can find a Bible, I'd like you to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, please.

For those of you who are visiting with us, this is a pretty serious service and it's a seriously happy service. Six people stepping forward for ministry in God's church, each candidate, you are, each of you, visible signs of the Holy Spirit's work and God's power to raise up workers for the harvest so that Jesus will continue his mission by the power of the Spirit for his glory, building his church here in Canada.

And we're very glad, we're overjoyed that this day of prayer and discernment and hope has come. And we're here together to show our prayerful support for you as you are commissioned and Dan lays hands on you and ordains you for the work of ministry.

This idea of ordain comes from the word order, to set something in order. And we are admitting these three to the order of deacon and these three to the order of priest, ministry, position, office, order.

And it comes from the New Testament idea of having a rightly ordered church. And the Bible idea of a rightly ordered church are local congregations with a particular kind of shepherd leaders whose lives are demonstrably godly, able to preach and teach and defend the gospel and shepherd the flock.

[1 : 52] And you're going to hear more of this in just a moment. As we go through the service, you'll see there are very high expectations of you six, which is just as well, because most of the Vancouver culture around us would say you can hardly find anything, any career that's more irrelevant and useless than ministry in the church.

Sorry to tell you that, but it's just true. You probably know it already. Well-intentioned, but ineffective. A relic of a bygone era. In every church I've worked, people will come to me and say, you would have made a really good, and they'll put a career in there that they think has worth. A good teacher or a good mechanic or something like that. Thank you very much. Yes. The lovely thing, though, tonight is that God has not left us in the dark to have to invent the shape of ministry. The New Testament has a very definite shape of pastoral ministry, as we've heard, first seen in Jesus Christ. And now we read under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. And one of the most important of those comes to us in 1 Corinthians. And I want to settle down in chapters 3 and 4 for a few minutes and then go to chapter 13.

[3 : 15] You'll see why, I hope. And if you don't, I don't mind. So Corinth, this is a church which is so gifted and impressive and so arrogant and so spiritually infantile.

They wanted to make the gospel change so it was more Corinthian. And they loved outward appearances and success. And by the way, clergy wear robes to hide their appearances. But by wearing them today, we probably make ourselves look more impressive. There you are. I thought Will was going to talk to the kids about that. That was a chance missed Will. Anyway. Did a good job, though.

You can still go forward. So in Corinth, the church was this big competition. You know, who had the biggest gifts? Who was the most successful?

And they were fighting and biting each other. Who was the best preacher? Who was their favorite pastor? And they were in danger of dividing over it. And in chapters 3 and 4, the apostle speaks about himself and Apollos, who was just another worker.

[4 : 28] And he explains heaven's point of view on what it is to be part of a ministry team. So if you've got your Bible open at page 953, 1 Corinthians 4, verse 1.

This is heaven's view of ministry. This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it's required of stewards they be found faithful. Now, that does not make Corinthians happy. They wanted greatness.

They wanted leaders who could wow and succeed and bring big numbers. This idea of servants, they say, yuck. And the word is worse than servant.

The word is for under rowers, the guys who are in the belly of the ship, on the bottom row of the ship. It's a picture you could have some fun with. But they're all rowing together in one direction so that the church is going one way.

[5 : 33] So the person in charge of this ship is not the rower. It's not the congregation. It's not even the bishop.

It's Jesus Christ himself. Look at what he says. This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ. Not first of all, servants of the congregation.

Of course, the apostle strives to be servants of every congregation, as does each minister of the gospel. We are given people to serve. But the one that I am to please and the one that you are to please ultimately is Jesus Christ.

And that is profoundly relieving and liberating. You will already know something of the pressure of expectations people have for you.

If you have a church of 100 people, you have 100 different sets of expectations on you. And in Corinth, the expectation was to be outwardly impressive.

[6 : 36] To be the most brilliant and forceful speaker and preacher. To gather great numbers. And the apostle Paul has already said how ridiculous it is to measure ministry by numbers.

Although we just keep doing it all the time. Look back at 3, verse 6 and 7. Twice he says, it's God who gives the growth. We plant and water and play in the garden.

It's God who gives the growth. God and God alone. And in your ministry, you'll experience all sorts of expectations. Some of them godly.

Some of them ungodly. The cruelest expectations in my experience are the ones I have of myself. And that's why it's so important for us to keep coming back to the New Testament shape of ministry. To see that it's Jesus' expectations. Because his expectations are able to nurture us and sustain us every day of this life until we reach the end.

[7 : 39] What does that mean? This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ. It means we are stewards of the mysteries of God. Paul's already explained what mysteries are in chapter 2.

The mysteries of God is the gospel of the crucifixion of the Son of God. The mysteries are not the sacraments. It's not the mystery of the other person, the other human being before you.

It's the ministry of preaching the cross of Christ. And I just mentioned that there's always pressure in the Christian church. Always pressure to move the cross of Christ out of the centre of your preaching and your thinking and your believing and your ministry.

To make a little bit more room for something more palatable or powerful. But as good stewards, our job is to go into the pantry, bring out the food, the cross of Christ and feed the household.

And what does Jesus require, verse 2? It's required of stewards that they be found faithful. Not successful. Not successful. Not colourful.

[8 : 46] Not that terrible evangelical word, helpful. But faithful. Not to teach less than the gospel or to teach more than the gospel. But to tell the whole truth.

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No matter how inconvenient for you or for your hearers. Here endeth the introduction. Okay.

So what does it mean? What is this apostolic shake of pastoral ministry? Because I've got you here now, we're going to do the rest of the book of Corinthians. No, no. Paul gives us two answers.

The first is, the apostolic, the New Testament shape of ministry is that it's an eternal work building on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

And look down to chapter 3, verses 10 to 15 with me. And just notice as I read this, that four times the apostle refers to the work, the work of ministry.

[9 : 47] In verse 10 he says, According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation. He says someone else is building on it.

And there's someone else. We don't hear a name, but there's someone in Corinth, a new teacher, who is trying to go a different direction, away from the foundation of Jesus Christ. Let each one take

care how he builds on it.

For no one can lay a foundation other than that is laid which is Jesus Christ. Here it goes. 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, that is, if it's built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but he'll smell very smoky when he gets there. Ministry is a long game.

[11 : 13] I don't mean until you retire. The work of ministry goes on into eternity. And this is not just the work of the ministry of the pastor teacher.

This is ministry in its broadest sense for all of us believers, all of us who are serving Jesus Christ, who are trying to build our lives and build our ministries on the person of Jesus.

The apostle wants the Corinthians to change their timeline, away from what they can see now, to what is going to survive the coming day of the Lord.

Because everything we do as believers must pass through the fire of God's assessment on the last day. It's not an assessment as to whether you and I are believers.

That's verse 15. But it's a test of whether the things that we have done in our ministries will last into eternity, whether they've been built on Jesus Christ.

[12 : 18] And I think this is the point of the different elements. Those six things that he lists, the point of them is their flammability, whether they will go through the flame or not of God's assessment.

Gold, silver, precious stones, they last through the fire, whereas wood, hay and straw, they're burned up. They don't last.

Some things we do in ministry, brothers and sisters, will last for eternity, and some things will be burned up on the last day, and we will be saved, but with that smoky aroma around us.

And the difference is, those things that are built on Jesus Christ will last, and those things not built on Jesus Christ will be burned up. What does that mean?

It means that the true nature and results of anyone's ministry are hidden from our eyes now. We cannot tell what's going on in different people's ministries just by looking at the surface.

[13 : 27] Of course, there are some things we can test immediately, but most of what goes on in Christian ministry cannot test until the day of Christ reveals it. The Corinthians are looking at their church in terms of the world around them, and it looks so dull and unsatisfactory.

But the mark of what God is really doing and what pleases Him is that it's not showing, but that it's built on the person of Jesus Christ. That means the person of Jesus as He's revealed to us in the gospel, as our wisdom and our righteousness and our sanctification and our redemption.

And as Jesus Christ is proclaimed and becomes real to us through that gospel, He makes us alive to God, gives us eternal life, keeps us through this life, keeps us through death, and equips us every day of our life to live for Him.

And this is why the church is such a treasure. Just look at verses 16 and 17 for a moment. Paul says, He's speaking corporately to the church.

And the God 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.

[14 : 53] So the local church is the dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter how frail and feeble it looks. It's very precious in the sight of God.

It takes faith to believe this. It's not merely a human fellowship. A church is not a sum total of its plans and budgets and programs. It's not even a human-made activity.

It's God's temple where He dwells by His Holy Spirit. You could call the Apostle Paul the original high churchman. He has such a high view of the church. And God is outraged when lazy pastors corrupt the church.

The word destroy is simply the word corrupt and contaminate. And pastors don't teach Jesus Christ, or they don't teach in accordance with Jesus Christ.

But when we do, church is the dwelling place of the living God. So here is the first point. This is the first thing about the shape of ministry in the book of Corinthians.

[16 : 05] That is, it is an eternal work, assessed by God in the end, and the privilege we have is of building on Jesus Christ. That is the what of ministry.

Point two, what is the how? How can we build in an eternal way? And for this, I want to turn over to 1 Corinthians 13 for just a moment.

And my second point for those of you who take notes is that the work of ministry is an eternal work of love.

You see, it's not just the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus which is eternal. Remember in chapter 13, verse 8, love never ends, never passes away, never collapses.

Or verse 13, faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. That means that it is love that makes up the life of heaven.

[17:12] And it is as we seek to serve Jesus in love and act in love with one another, the life of heaven comes into our lives and through us into the life of others now.

This is the how of ministry. It's not enough to have clear doctrine. It's not enough to be accurate in what you say. The apostle, this is very challenging.

The apostle says, without love, our ministry is useless. Self-serving Christians and self-serving ministry is completely self-defeating.

Look at the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13. Just lovely. Paul is describing himself. He stops using the plural and he becomes personal.

You could say he's describing three kind of churches. So verse 1, perhaps he's describing the charismatic church. If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[18:21] Well, Paul is the gift of tongues, which was mighty impressive to the Corinthians. And even more impressive, he'd been to visit the third heaven and he'd heard the tongues of angels. He'd heard things that no human could ever hear.

I mean, the apostle had the dazzle factor and he knew what it was to be tempted to strut his stuff. But he says, without love, that's just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, which is a profoundly offensive thing to say to the Corinthians because that noisy gong was the gong that was used in pagan worship in Corinth to wake the God up.

So when they'd ring the gong, it was, wake up, O God. Bong. Attend to us, O God. Bong. And the apostle is saying, if I do things without love, that's all I am.

Well, verse 2 is like the reformed evangelical church, perhaps. If I have prophetic powers that understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

Corinthians loved knowledge. They respected it pretty well above everything else. The only problem is that knowledge without love just puffs up with pride. pride.

[19:36] It's love that builds up. And you can use your knowledge without love, and when you do, it's hollow and of no help to anyone else. Or the third church, which you might want to say is a social justice church.

If I give away all I have, if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

Spectacular generosity and deeds. Even the highest sacrifice of being martyred.

The apostle says it's possible to do those things without love and it's just an empty gesture. But please notice more carefully, the apostle does not say that tongues or knowledge or self-sacrifice are empty.

He describes the effect of his own lovelessness and what it has on him. It's not that the tongues are a noisy gong in verse 1.

He says, I have become a noisy gong. When I exercise my ministry without love, he says, it transforms me into being something I never really wanted to be.

[20:50] It's not the gift that's hollow. I become hollow. It diminishes me. It leaves a permanent effect on me. Without love, the highest and best noise that I can make just leaves me empty and meaningless.

And the opposite is also true. When we use our gifts in love, it not only helps those who are being loved, it makes me become more of what God has meant me to be.

It's the same is true for prophecy and for knowledge and for faith. Without love, knowledge, it's not knowledge is nothing, it's I am nothing.

I love, therefore I am. My very being as a believer and belonging to the fellowship of the church is actively built up and engaging in love.

The Holy Spirit makes me a more complete person as we give ourselves away in love to others. I think this is amazing. I mean, Christian love, it's completely necessary, not just for others, but for me.

[21 : 54] All my Christian life and serving is not real unless I love. And when I love in this Christian sense, it makes me more than myself.

It enlarges me, it takes me out of myself to others. Through love, we escape from the dungeon of our own egos. We become more alive.

And you know this, you know this in your relationships. as we give ourselves away in love. It doesn't matter how grumpy you're feeling on your way to church. It's as though love gives me substance and reality as a Christian.

And this is the second mark, the second shape of Christian ministry. It is love. And ten times he uses this unique word, this Christian word, agape.

In the Greek culture, the word for love was about emotion and sex and ecstasy. This is different. Agape is not something you can work up. It's not a human virtue. It's not a personality type.

[22 : 56] You know, some people are just very loving. It's a supernatural gift from God who sheds his love abroad in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. It's the power of heaven, it's the power of the future breaking into the present.

And when God pours his love into our hearts, it draws us to God, it draws us to the future and it draws us to serve each other in deliberate and costly activity, trying to find the best that you can do for the other person.

It's the kind of love that when you come to a Christian gathering makes you ask these questions. How can I encourage and strengthen someone else as I come to church?

Because I've been preparing on this, I was praying this as I walked to church this morning, and when I got to the step, someone came up to me and spent three minutes encouraging me and I thought, rats!

It was lovely, but when you come to church, how can I pray for people en route to church? Who do I not know yet that I can welcome?

[24 : 08] Who is sitting on their own? What can I say to someone that build up their faith and strengthen them or encourage them? what can I do to strengthen things that are weak?

What can I do for others? And this is the second part of the ministry of the gospel, brothers and sisters. The gospel has the eternal shape.

It lasts forever because it's built on the person of Jesus Christ and because it's built with the love of God, this agape love of God. And where does this come from?

How do these things come together? That love comes from the person of Jesus Christ and from his cross. Let me finish with this.

How do you know God loves you now? In Romans 5, verse 8, we read these words, God shows his love for us in the while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

[25 : 10] You ever notice the time shift? God shows his love in the present tense, right now, ongoingly, because Christ died for us in the past tense.

So if I want to draw on this love of Christ, if I want to increase in this love of Christ, if I want to have a sense of the love of Christ on my heart, I need to go back to the cross of Jesus Christ and consider him and consider God's love for me there to meditate on his great love and to cling to him and abide in him, and his promise is that then he will shed his love abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit slowly, gradually, permanently.

So let's pray together. Amen. Amen. So let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.