

# 1 Corinthians 3:1-17 PM

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[ 0 : 00 ] You all need to grow up. How's that for an opening line? Do you feel a little offended just hearing that? A little bit of defensiveness bristle up inside of us? I'll be honest, I didn't even really like saying it. I mean, you could be 5, 15, or 55. It doesn't matter.

Nobody likes being told to grow up. I mean, that can be said. Grow up can be said in a way that's very mean or dismissive, and that's obviously not good. But here's the thing. Sometimes we actually do need to grow up, and sometimes we need people we love and trust to speak that hard truth in love.

For example, there's a story. The youth pastors at my church led me to Christ when I was about 19. Now, they're a couple who had known me for many years, and after I came to faith, they actually became quite close friends. I remember having coffee with them once, probably two years after I came to faith, and I just poured out my heart. I was sharing about all this stuff. My family was messed up, and school was stressful, and I was discouraged by all these habits I couldn't kick. I mean, stuff that I'd shared with them lots of times before. And so when I finally finished, I sort of sat back and waited, waited for just the soothing words of comfort and affirmation.

You know, God's grace is made perfect in your weakness. You know, this is all really hard, but you'll get through it. It'll be okay. And instead, they just looked at me and said, Will, you need to grow up and take some responsibility for your life and faith.

[ 1 : 49 ] I, of course, immediately recognized the wisdom and truth of what they were saying. I just have to say, I was running through my sermon last night with my wife, and I got to that line, and she literally, literally cut me off with the most shocked look on her face and said, You did?

And I did it. I did it, actually. I was actually pretty mad. I was pretty upset with them. I mean, I thought the deal was, in that relationship, that I shared my problems with them, and then they told me it was all going to be okay, right? And that it wasn't actually so bad.

But here's the thing. Part of why I was mad is because deep down, I actually knew that they were right. I did need to grow up. That was hard to hear in the moment, but it was true.

Now, if you've had an experience like this, you might have some sense of how the Corinthians felt when they got to chapter 3 in Paul's letter. Look at verse 1 together, and it'd be helpful if you follow along as we go, 1 Corinthians 3. Look at verse 1.

But I, brothers and sisters, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. This is a hard truth spoken in love, especially for the Corinthian church.

[ 3 : 13 ] In Corinth, being impressive was everything. You climbed the social ladder either by becoming impressive or by attaching yourself to impressive people, or by attaching yourself to impressive people.

And this attitude had bled into the Corinthian church. They thought that they were spiritual people because they had these impressive outward spiritual gifts and outwardly impressive leaders and teachers.

But Paul says, Notice he doesn't question whether they are Christians.

He calls them brothers and sisters. He says they are in Christ. But it seems like their growth has been stunted or stopped altogether. If we look at verse 2, when Paul planted the church in Corinth, they were like spiritual newborns, learning the basics of Christ and his gospel and how to live for him.

But it seems like nothing has changed since Paul was there. They are still of the flesh, worldly. Basically, they still look more like Corinth than Christ.

[ 4 : 28 ] And that's a problem. And notice, how does Paul know this? What does he point to? I mean, there's tons of really awful, scandalous stuff happening at this church.

But here, in verse 3, Paul points to jealousy, rivalry, and conflicts among them. I mean, in a sense, it's not that complicated.

Paul has been saying to them for a while now that their lives should be shaped by the countercultural wisdom of Christ and his cross. But they're just doing what everybody else does. Boasting in their gifts, breaking off into all kinds of cliques and factions and divisions. They are being merely human in the most basic kind of way.

And this is a clear rebuke of the Corinthians and their spiritual pride. Friends, Christian spirituality actually has nothing to do with how impressive we are.

[ 5 : 28 ] To be spiritual as a Christian means growing in the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control.

It means, as Paul says at the end of chapter 2, having the mind of Christ, which isn't some secret spiritual knowledge, but a commitment to emptying ourselves in the service of others.

Basically, Christian spirituality is the opposite of jealousy, pride, strife, and conflict. So, while their petty power games don't disqualify the Corinthians from being Christians, they do show a real need for spiritual growth and maturity among them.

I think if we're honest, these things are a temptation for all of us. It's so easy to look at ourselves, to look at our church, and think, we've made it.

We're a big church with a big staff. We have lots of gifted lay leaders and good programs and strong Bible studies. We're committed to Scripture. We haven't given in to cultural agendas and narratives like all these other churches.

[ 6 : 41 ] So, surely we're spiritual, right? Surely we're mature in Christ. But are we growing in unity and love for one another?

Is there pride, rivalry, or envy bubbling away in our hearts? I think these are the questions Paul would have us ask if we want to assess our own spiritual growth as people and as a church.

So, here's the problem. The Corinthians are stuck in spiritual infancy. Their pursuit of worldly power and status has stunted their growth in Christ.

It's left them looking more like Corinth, more like the world, than the cross of Christ. So, what's the solution? How does Paul address the problem? He gives them two pictures, right?

Two word pictures that show what the church is and how the church grows and is built up. So, the first picture, this is verses 5 to 9, is the church as a field which God is growing.

[ 7 : 52 ] And this has to do largely with the place of leaders or ministers in the church. Paul asks, what then is Apollos? What then is Paul?

Notice not who, not who, but what. Paul is really trying to shift their focus away from personality and charisma to focus on the calling of these people.

So, he says, what then is Apollos? What then is Paul? Servants. Not masters. Not leaders. Not charismatic, intellectually impressive teachers.

Servants through whom you believed. So, Paul is painting this picture where Apollos and himself and leaders in the church are workers sent by the Lord to plant and water a particular part of his field or vineyard.

And if we're honest, being a laborer in somebody else's field isn't glamorous work. It requires hard work. It requires hard work, consistency, commitment.

[ 9 : 04 ] But it's not going to win you any social capital or popularity contest, especially in a place like Corinth or, frankly, a place like Vancouver. You're assigned a job.

You're assigned a job and you do it. Some plant like Paul. Others water like Apollos. But here's the key. Here's the point we can't miss.

It's God who gives the growth. And therefore, it's God who gets the glory. God gives the growth, so God gets the glory. You see, the Corinthians put their spiritual leaders up on pedestals.

It's not just that they respected them for their godliness or wisdom. They treated them like spiritual rock stars. I mean, people gathered around their favorite leaders because they thought that if they attached themselves to these impressive people, they could gain status or influence in the church and in society.

Good thing that's not a problem in the church today. But Paul said to them, you've got it all backwards, right? We aren't anything.

[ 10 : 12 ] We aren't anything special. We serve. God brings the life, growth, and transformation. Paul says, you, that's you plural, you, the church, are God's field.

Your ministers and leaders are co-workers with God, given to you as servants. We plant and water, but God brings the life and growth.

And this is really important for us to grasp. There is one church, and it belongs to God. Nothing here at St. John's belongs to you or to me or to Aaron or to David Short.

So much of the corruption and abuse that we see in the church comes down to either ministers and leaders who think that the church exists for them and their benefit, or actually people who give these kinds of leaders a platform, because there's something in all of us that likes being associated with impressive, powerful, charismatic people.

And that's why Paul keeps coming back to the point that Christian maturity isn't about having impressive gifts or an impressive church. It's about how much our lives have been shaped by Christ and his cross.

[11:31] So don't idolize your leaders. Don't put them on pedestals. At our best, we are servants. Workers who have been given the privilege of planting the seed of the gospel among all of you and praying and celebrating when God gives the growth that only he can give.

So that's the first picture, the field. And the second picture, which we see in verses 10 to 17, is God's building or temple.

A building or temple. And in this picture, we are all involved. All of us are involved one way or another in building God's church. And all of us are also accountable to God for how we build one another up in the church.

And this is serious business for Paul. Look at verse 10. He says, And then he says, And then he says, he kind of grabs their attention and he says, So in this scenario, Paul envisions himself as the architect.

He's the master builder who came to Corinth, who laid the foundation of Christ and his gospel when he planted the church there. And he knows that others will come and build on this thing that he started.

[13:02] That's not necessarily a problem, right? Paul's not possessive of the church. He's not controlling of the church. But he wants the church to be built in the right way with the right stuff.

Because there's a kind of work and a kind of building that will last long beyond our lives, actually into eternity. And there's a kind of building that will not. Paul says the day of God's judgment will reveal how each person built on the foundation of Christ.

He says, At our staff meeting this week, we were going through this passage and someone asked, What's the difference between these things?

And another person responded, Their flammability. And it's true. Wood, hay, and straw are burned up in the fire, whereas gold and silver and precious stones not only pass through the fire, they're actually made more pure.

They're made more refined and valuable by passing through the fire. And so this is a picture of God judging the quality of our work and ministry for his kingdom.

[14:21] This judgment isn't about salvation. It's not a question of whether or not these people are Christians. Paul assumes that they are in Christ, forgiven, saved from God's judgment.

But Paul is saying that there will be a judgment on the day of Christ, which will reveal the truth of what we have built on Christ and his foundation.

And whether what we built will last into eternity. And this matters because the Corinthians are trying to build up the church of Christ with pride, rivalry, judgment, infighting, and empty talk.

Essentially, they're trying to build up the church of Christ in a very worldly way. Paul is saying this is all straw and hay. It may look impressive now, but it won't survive God's judgment.

So what kind of building lasts? It's one that is built on Christ and built with love. There's two things in 1 Corinthians that Paul says are eternal.

[15:28] Two things. That's the good news of Jesus Christ and love. The good news of Jesus Christ and love. So as we build one another up in Christ, we do this by serving one another in selfless love, the same way that Jesus came and served us.

And God promises to reward this kind of work in the life to come. So before we come to the last two verses and wrap it up, let's just remember where we've been.

The Corinthians are stuck in spiritual infancy. Paul knows this because their church looks more like Corinth than Christ. They're worldly in how they treat one another.

So Paul reminds them that the church belongs to God, that leaders in the church are given as servants of God, and that all of us are accountable for how we build up one another in love. We all tracking with that so far? Now, in the last two verses of our reading, we see just how much this matters to God.

[16:40] We see just how important this is to God. Paul says something absolutely remarkable about the church in verse 16. He says, Do you not know that you, that's plural, y'all, you might want to say, referring to the whole church, do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?

Do you know this? Do you know that God has set us apart together to be his dwelling place in the world? And this is what we mean when we say in the creed, I believe in one holy church. We're not talking about a building or some kind of sacred space. We're talking about a people, living stones who God is building together to make his home in the world.

We're talking about all of you here tonight. God cares about our life together because he cares about the church. The church is absolutely precious to God.

It's his temple. It's the place where he has chosen to dwell in the world. And the way that we live together can either build up or destroy that temple.

[18:05] To make this really practical, what comes to mind when you think of things that threaten to destroy the church? What threatens to destroy the church?

Maybe changes in doctrine or teaching, abandoning the gospel, possibly public scandals, things like sexual immorality. These are all true, but I wonder how many of us would think of things like gossiping or jealousy or dividing around particular leaders and their charisma.

Things like murder, idolatry, sexual immorality, gossiping, jealousy, slander. Paul actually puts all these things on the same playing field. You can think of it this way.

When a family falls apart, it often begins with subtle, selfish relational breakdowns. Dysfunction in a family may end in really terrible things like affairs or violence or abuse, but they usually start with the failure to love and honor and serve one another in little day-to-day things.

And it's no different in God's family, the church. Growing up as a Christian, growing into maturity as a Christian, means growing in love, peace, patience, and kindness.

[19:26] Christian maturity is about sharing the mind of Christ, which means giving ourselves for the good of others and the glory of God.

So friends, we are God's fields. We are God's building. We are God's temple. So it matters. It matters greatly how we live and work together.

Jealousy and pride are subtle sins that eat away at God's temple, brick by brick, person by person. And we are all called together to be builders.

So let's commit to building something here at St. John's that pleases God, because it's built on Christ, and it's built in love. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.