

1 Corinthians 3:1-17 AM

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Date: 15 October 2023

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- [0 : 0 0] So let's turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, shall we? Page 953, Mark just read for us. If you're new with us, we've been moving through this book of 1 Corinthians and the focus so far has been on the place of the cross of Jesus Christ in Christian living.
- You know, the New Testament teaches three main aspects to the cross of Christ. One, it's the power of God to save. Two, it's the wisdom of God to reveal his love.
- And thirdly, it is the pathway for life for all who follow Jesus. As we receive the salvation and begin to see life through the revelation of the cross, we respond out of love to God and we live a cross-shaped life in our practical decisions, particularly in serving others and putting them ahead of us as Jesus did.
- And it's this third aspect of the cross that is missing in Corinth. And it's the main point of chapters 1 to 4. In fact, if you look at the last phrase of the last verse of chapter 2, this is exactly what the apostle means when he says, we have the mind of Christ.
- What do you think that means, the mind of Christ? It's not some intellectual key to the secrets of heaven. It means the whole mindset Jesus had when he chose to empty himself, to humble himself, to love us by serving us to death.
- [1 : 3 5] And this is where the whole idea of being spiritual, of being a spiritual person comes from. The mark of the Holy Spirit in each of us is that we humble ourselves and that we try and serve others.
- Rather than using others for our benefit, we seek to humble ourselves and serve them, to count them more significant than we are, rather than trying to be better than they are.
- We give ourselves to serve them. That's why chapter 3, 1 to 4, comes as something of a shock. For the first time in this letter, Paul is openly critical of his beloved Corinthians.
- Now, he softens it by calling them brothers and sisters, but it is still open rebuke. Look at 3, 1. But I, brothers and sisters, could not address you as spiritual, as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infantile, infants in Christ.
- Now, that's something of a rebuke because the Corinthians were totally convinced that they were spiritual, very spiritual, very spiritual people.
- [2 : 4 9] Over the years, we've had parents who've asked their children to be accelerated in Sunday school because they think their children are very spiritual. Only takes a couple of weeks to find out they were not.
- No, says Paul, you are not. You certainly have the Holy Spirit because you couldn't believe in Jesus otherwise, but you're not controlled by the Holy Spirit.
- You're not living in a Christ-like manner. Your attitudes and your behaviours are more like Corinth than they are like Christ, particularly, verse 3, your jealousy and fighting and forming factions around your favourite leaders.
- As we go through this book, we're going to see this is very important. To be spiritual for the Corinthians meant having the biggest ecstatic experiences in their church gatherings with the biggest, brassiest, boastiest preaching.

To be spiritual for the Corinthians meant freedom to be sexually promiscuous, freedom not to care about the poor when they had communion, so they treated communion as a food trough.

[3 : 59] It meant freedom to break out of God's assigned gender roles, freedom to eat food offered to idols, even if doing that would crush the faith of weaker Christians.

And in chapters 1 to 4, they thought being spiritual meant gathering around their favourite Christian leaders and boosting their Christian leader ahead of others and tearing down other Christian leaders, using leaders for their own self-promotion and trying to control the church for their own selfish position and prominence.

It's unimaginable, isn't it? No, it's not. It's completely imaginable, I think. You see, it is possible to be a Christian, but to resist the Holy Spirit and the cross as a way of life in your life and to act in a way that is spiritually infantile.

Now, babies are beautiful. All babies are beautiful. We have a third grandchild. He is the most beautiful. And it's very appropriate that he lies in my arm and can't say anything and just reaches up his hand and touches my face.

But adults who act as spiritual babies, they're a menace, actually, and they're tragic. And that's Paul's point in verses 1 to 4.

[5 : 24] He's not blaming them for being baby Christians. He's blaming them for their ongoing desire to hold control to things, which shows that they're operating out of the flesh and according to the world and not the Holy Spirit.

And that's the opposite of the mind of Christ. It's the opposite of being filled with the Spirit. It's not self-emptying and self-sacrificing and self-giving for the good of others.

It's self-seeking and self-promotion and arrogance and ambition. And I think these verses, wonderful, would have stunned the Corinthians.

Very gifted, highly intelligent, able, not spiritual. You can't be serious. Now, I think it is this infantile spirituality that is responsible for so much abuse and hurt in the church.

When leaders use the church for their own self-promotion and honour, treating the church as the place to gratify the desires of the flesh.

[6 : 34] And it begins to reflect in groups in the church who say, our church is the best church around. We've got the best leaders. They do things the way we want.

But it's just not living out the cross of Jesus Christ. It's motivated by purely selfish desires. Instead of giving ourselves for others, we use others for our selfish ends.

So if we're not to use our leaders for self-promotion, how are we to rightly honour them? And here the apostle makes two steps forward, and this is the point.

We're going to move into the passage now. He introduces two images of the church. And both of these images of the church run completely counter the controlling, competitive Corinthian view of the church and move us to serving Christ in his church.

The first picture is in verses 5 to 7. The church has God's field, where the ministers are God's field servants.

[7 : 43] Okay, so how do we think about leaders and ministers? We are God's field, and ministers are God's field workers. It's a lovely way to describe a church, isn't it?

I mean, it comes from the Old Testament. Israel was the field of God. And now in the New Testament, every church, it doesn't matter where it is, how big or how small, every church is a field where God is at work, by his word, growing fruit and growing people by the power of his grace.

The emphasis is not on the ministers, is not on the workers, but on God and his creative energy, giving growth to his people through the work of ministers. So look at verse 5 to 7.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Not who, but what. They're objects in this picture.

They are servants, through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. And Paul says, I planted and Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

[8 : 52] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. So how should we think of our ministers and our leaders in the gospel?

The early apostle gives a picture which is beautifully balanced. On the one side, ministers are servants, lowly field hands, who are not working for themselves, they're working for another.

And then in verse 9, he gives the other side of the picture, they are God's fellow workers, the highest possible privilege. It's as though the Lord of all the world stoops down, not just to work through the frail, fragile, sinful human ministers, but to draw them up, to become fellow workers with him in the privilege of what he's doing.

So ministers are servants through whom God works at best. Therefore ministers ought to see themselves as servants.

This is Jesus' ministry, wasn't it? I am among you as one who serves. And the service of being a humble field hand is hard work. It's back-breaking.

[10 : 06] Paul the apostle arrived first, then Apollos came along and did a bit more. There's nothing terribly glamorous about that. After the early service, someone came up and told me that his father was, no, his grandfather was an award-winning farmer.

I thought, it kind of breaks my categories of farmers. I didn't know they gave awards to farmers for being good at what they did. But that's why Paul says in verse 8, they're one.

They're one in status. They're all servants. We're one in goal, where the goal is to please the Lord Jesus Christ. We're one in work, preaching the cross of Christ. So all ministers are not meant to be in it for applause or to gather supporters around ourselves or to amaze people by clever, sophisticated speeches.

We're here to plant seed, to water seed, to manure seed, to take the supernatural seed of the word of God and try and allow it to be planted in the hearts of people.

And just as soon as you think that ministers are dispensable, verse 5 tells us that actually it's God who has assigned ministers. It's God who appoints ministers to churches so that ministers are God's gift to each church.

[11 : 24] But it's God who does the growth. The Lord assigns, the Lord gives the growth, the Lord gives the growth. You know, Paul came to Corinth around 50 AD. What did he have? He had nothing.

All he had was the cross of Jesus Christ to preach. And against great opposition, he began to preach. And God established a Christian church there.

New people, new creations, with new faith and new life. Although he had no power to change anyone, the Lord established a church through his work.

And since it's God alone who gives the growth, to focus on the personality or the gifts or the style or the success of the minister is completely missing the point, don't you think?

I mean, it's like going to an art gallery and obsessing over the frames and not even looking at the paintings. I mean, none of us can actually convert each other.

[12 : 25] None of us can make spiritual change in anyone else. We can't even cause each other to grow spiritually. All we can do is to plant and to water and to pray.

And I want to say what a great relief that is. Because it puts responsibility where it should be. It puts clergy in their place. You know, the effectiveness of ministry does not rely on the gifts of the minister but on God who gives the growth.

And in verse 6, the way it runs in the original, it means that ministers come and go but the work of God continues to grow and fruit in his field.

And I want to tell you that it is an amazing privilege over the years to see God continue to do that. Through the normal daily grind of preparing and teaching and serving, God powerfully grows his people and creates fruit for his own glory for the long term.

So verse 9, St John's, this is for you. Verse 9, you are God's field. You are the place of life and growth from God.

[13 : 43] You belong to God. Your ministers belong to God. Your ministers belong to you. You don't belong to us. We belong to you. And it is the responsibility of all in leadership to do what we can to plant and water and every now and again to do some weeding and some fertilizing.

That's the first picture. The first picture of the church is of the field and the ministers are servants. The second picture of the church is in verses 10 to 17 and it is the church as God's building and the other difference is that all of us are builders, not just the ministers.

This is based on the Old Testament picture of the temple. But every Christian church in New Testament terms is a building from God where God dwells, built of people.

And this is so important in Paul's letter to Corinth. They've forgotten this in Corinth that he's going to give three chapters later on in the letter showing that if you really want to see manifestations of the Holy Spirit, what you do is you seek to build up other people in their faith in the church by loving and by serving and by praying and by doing things, whatever you can do to build people up.

That is, it is the basic task and attitude of believers. This is very important. See, why did you come to church this morning? It is the basic task of every believer to do what we can to build up others in the church.

[15 : 26] Last Sunday I went to catechism. I had a great privilege to go to catechism class. I went for the food but I got much more. I was reminded, they were starting the creed, I was reminded that saying the creed is a profoundly corporate act in the service.

I believe but I'm saying it so that you can overhear it so that you'll be built up in your faith. It's exactly the same thing with singing. When we sing hymns it has a vertical dimension but it also has a horizontal dimension.

We are building each other up in our most holy faith. Do you know, when I first came to St John's, I've been here a couple of years and there was a guy who had come for the previous six years and he had an incredibly difficult life and I said to him, what has sustained you in your Christian life?

What's kept you going? He said, you know, I've heard some terrific sermons. I can't tell you anything from any of those sermons. I can't remember a single one but every time I come to church I say the big basis of the faith in the creed.

I go from creation to judgment. I go through Christ and the Holy Spirit and the whole world in the creed and it's the creed that's held me in my faith. But it wasn't just him saying the creed, it was others saying the creed around him.

[16 : 50] So your singing doesn't have to be in tune but your singing has to be flowing from your heart to God recognising there are others around you who want to hear what you've got to say.

The same with the prayers. How we say Amen at the end of the prayers. That's an other person centred thing to do. Amen? That was pretty weak.

Do you know there's someone on the production committee who whenever there are cookies at coffee time makes sure I get one. I find that vastly up building to myself.

I thought I'd say that. I think we need to repent of thinking about the church that it's there for me. We need to seek to come and to build up others in the church.

Paul says I laid the foundation I was first there I preached Jesus Christ and now in verse 10 there's a slightly ominous note there's someone else who's building upon it.

[17 : 55] Take care says the apostle this is a new teacher and the point for us is right at the end of verse 10 where he says let each one take care how he builds upon it.

In other words every single one of us ought to decide that we come to build up others and how we build up others. And he wants to challenge any hasty thinking around this and say actually you're building for eternity because what you build with how you build is going to be tested by the fire of God on the last day.

The apostle wants the Corinthians to change their timeline from what they can see now to what is going to survive the coming day of the Lord because everything we do as believers is going to pass through the fire of God's assessment on the last day.

This is not an assessment as to whether you're really Christian or not. Verse 15 it's not a test of salvation it's a test of serving and whether the things that we've done to serve others is going to last.

And that's the point of that little list in verse 12 of the different things gold, silver, precious stones on the one hand, wood, hay and straw on the other. The difference between those two groups is flammability.

[19 : 19] Gold, silver and precious stones last through fire but wood, hay and straw are burned up. So some things we do in ministry will last for eternity others will be burned up at the last day though we will be saved and we will arrive with a little smoky smell.

And the difference is that those things built on the foundation of Jesus Christ will last and those things not built on the foundation of Jesus Christ will be burned up. Better to say it this way.

In the letter of 1 Corinthians there are two things particularly the apostle marks out as eternal. One is the person of Jesus Christ who died and has risen again and that means that all we build needs to be built in line with the person of Jesus Christ according to Jesus based on him.

A children's ministry, our activities on Saturdays, they need to be the occasions to build on Jesus Christ. But the second thing in 1 Corinthians that is eternal is love.

Love never ends. The same love that we saw at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ has now been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit so that all that we do in love that builds others up is going to last through the fire of God's assessment.

[20 : 46] all that we do for selfish applause or for self gain or for show, it'll be burned up. And that means the true result and the true nature of anyone's life and ministry is hidden from what we can see.

We can't really tell what's going on but just by looking at the surface. I mean some things you can test immediately but most of what's true and most of what is real and most of what is really important needs to go through the fire of the last day to be revealed.

And the Corinthians were looking at their church in terms of the world around them it seems so dull and so unsatisfactory but the mark of what pleases God is not showy but what is built on Jesus Christ.

And that brings us to the last two verses and I finish with this. Why is this important? You know what kind of building is this that God has here? Here is the why.

verses 16 and 17 and these are addressed to every church. Do you not know you plural that you plural are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you not individually although he does he'll say that in chapter 6 but here as the temple of God the Holy Spirit dwells in us as a community if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy them for God's temple is holy and you are that temple.

[22 : 26] And how could you describe how precious the church is to God? So grand that's why he's going on about this and he has come to dwell in us by his Holy Spirit.

Here is a community and that is why he is so near and the church is so dear to him and every church is a dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit.

in this place that Christ died for and that God himself cares so deeply about that he's going to stand against anyone who uses and misuses and abuses his body.

But this is who you are St. John's. You are the place of God's dwelling where God is at work. We the pastors we belong to you. As God's field we will work hard as servants.

As God's building turn away from using each other and seek to serve each other and grow each other until that day when Christ will be glorified through what has happened here to all eternity.

[23 : 30] Amen.