

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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[0 : 00] Well, our sermon text this morning is 1 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 1 through 9. That's page 953 in the Pew Bible. Let me invite you to turn there with me.

Let me read our text for us.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now, you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

[1 : 17] Servants. Through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 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.

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Let's pray together. God, we acknowledge that our eyes are closed to spiritual things, to the things of you. Unless you, by your spirit, open our eyes for us.

So God, we ask that you would do just that now, as we consider the message of this passage. That you would open blinded eyes. That you would soften hardened hearts. That you would awaken us from our sleep.

So that we might see you in your son, Jesus Christ. And then we might turn from selfishness and waywardness and worship and trust you alone.

[2 : 31] Father, we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, imagine with me a man named Phil.

Phil has all the right theological books in his library. On a day like today, Reformation Sunday.

Did you know that? It's Reformation Sunday. Is that actually right, John? Is today Reformation Sunday? I think it is. Well, Phil could show you a whole section devoted to the reformers in his library.

Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, even Melancthon, and Bucer. He's read and digested them all. It seems. And he's got a great stock of commentaries on every book of the Bible.

Works from every period of the church. Phil really knows his stuff. Spiritually speaking, he looks like a pretty mature person. And then there's Wendy. Wendy loves her local church.

[3 : 30] After all, it's a growing, vibrant place. People are coming to know Christ. People care for and love each other. And she's there every Sunday. Singing from her heart.

Taking notes on the sermon. Serving in children's ministry every few weeks. Heck, she even comes to the evening service sometimes. Wendy loves her church.

Spiritually speaking, she looks like a pretty mature person. And of course, then there's Marcus. Marcus has an incredible conversion story.

He was running headlong away from God. Worried about no one but himself and his own aspirations. Until one day, a friend invited him to church. It was a well-known church in a big city with a faithful, godly, well-known pastor.

And over time, God's grace got a hold of Marcus. Pretty soon, everyone could see the difference. He had stopped chasing success and fame.

[4 : 34] And now he was humbly pursuing Christ. That was a number of years ago now. And Marcus's job has taken him to another city. But he's still following Jesus. He's still running the race after Christ.

Spiritually speaking, he too looks like a pretty mature person. But what would you say if I told you that in fact, each of these three Christians were still dangerously immature in their faith?

What if I told you that they were still, to use the Apostle Paul's words in verse 1, infants in Christ? You'd probably wonder, how could that be?

I mean, we'd love to have more Phil's and Wendy's and Marcus's in the church, wouldn't we? In fact, maybe you see yourself in one of them. Maybe some of the people you know are just like them. What could possibly be wrong with them?

After all, aren't genuine conversion like Marcus and active fellowship in a local church like Wendy and an understanding of the faith? Like Phil, aren't these the telltale signs of growing healthy Christianity?

[5 : 49] What could possibly be wrong? It would utterly shock us to think that they could be dangerously immature. And you know, in the same way, that's probably how the Christians in Corinth felt.

Shocked. When they first heard, read to them this section of Paul's letter. Six times in these four verses of chapter 3, these first four verses, Paul calls them more or less dangerously immature in Christ.

But wait a second, some of them must be thinking, us? Infants in Christ? Us behaving in a merely human way? Us, not spiritual, but of the flesh?

Paul, come on. That can't be. I mean, think of what we know about the church in Corinth. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the church at Corinth had been around for a number of years, probably five or more.

And for the first year and a half, the apostle Paul himself was their pastor and teacher. And then after that, they had Apollos, who was known for being a great teacher in the early church. So these weren't some newly planted, half-baked in the faith Christians.

[7 : 04] They seemed to have a good foundation, and they'd been around for a while, relatively speaking. And on top of all that, we know that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift, as Paul himself said back in chapter 1, verse 7.

In other words, the Holy Spirit was visibly active in their midst. What we might call today miraculous gifts were perhaps a regular thing for them.

So here it seemed was an established, vibrant, and yes, we would say spiritual church. Seminary students from all around were dying to get their internship credits at Corinth.

Corinth. Church growth magazines were always calling for interviews. Corinth was the it church. But Paul says, I could not even address you as spiritual people.

You're so woefully, dangerously immature. So what did Paul see that the Corinthians didn't?

[8 : 13] Look at verse 3. Less than halfway into that verse, he says, For while there is still jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

There it is. Jealousy and strife. Or perhaps we could put it this way. Comparison and competition.

What this text is telling us is that if our hearts are ruled by jealousy and strife, if they're riddled with comparison and competition, if our minds are constantly asking, where do I fit?

Am I ahead or falling behind? How can I make myself look a little better? Then we are still, friends, infants in Christ.

Then we're still living out of our old, fallen nature. And at the general level, that's certainly true. Jealousy and strife in any form are signs that we need to keep growing in our walk with Christ.

[9 : 22] But at Corinth, this comparison and competition took a specific form, a particular shape. Look at verse 4.

For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? Now we've seen this problem in previous weeks, haven't we?

The church in Corinth was becoming divided into factions based on which leader or teacher they identified with. And literally they were saying, not I follow Paul or Apollos, but literally I'm of Paul.

I'm of Apollos. I belong to this or that leader. And that makes me something special. That makes me a cut above. And that kind of comparison, that kind of competition, Paul says, proved that they were still infants in Christ.

Immature. Merely human. But is this a specific problem that we deal with today? I mean, maybe not in the same way, right?

[10 : 32] But it still crops up in some less obvious forms. Think about Phil with his great theological library. Of course, a deep understanding of the faith is a good thing.

We should all strive to grow in our biblical knowledge. Remember the church in Acts? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And so should we. At one point in Israel's history, God even said through the prophet Hosea that my people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge.

Growing in our understanding of the faith is incredibly important. But when Phil, with his great theological library, hears about some of the books that his fellow church members are reading, he sometimes can't help but look down his nose.

And you should have seen his face when someone recommended he read a new devotional that just came out. Devotional? Really? He thought. That's a little beneath me.

I mean, I'm reading Calvin's Institutes. Again. In the Latin. And in the French. I don't think I'll have time for your quaint devotional.

[11 : 40] But here's the thing. That devotional could have been full of the gospel. Full of Christ crucified. Phil wasn't rejecting it because it was full of errors or heresy.

He was rejecting it because in his mind he only reads big important Christian books, the real theology. In other words, he had propped up his identity in the church among other Christians over against other Christians with his reading habits and preferences.

And in so doing, he was setting himself over against his brothers and sisters in Christ. Just because they recommended something a little less weighty and academic. And just like Corinth, the church is divided.

Or think about Wendy who loved her local church. That, of course, is a great thing. Healthy Christianity is always lived out in a concrete, face-to-face body of Christ that we call the local church.

Again, remember the church in Acts. They devoted themselves to the fellowship. Not to the podcast. To the fellowship.

[12 : 51] But Wendy, while she's thrilled about her own church, she isn't so thrilled about the fact that there's a new church starting up in town.

Some of her friends visited the other Sunday and they told her that the gospel was really clearly preached. Wendy even went and checked out their website. And there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the church.

But that just makes her all the more uneasy and upset. Because people should want to come to her church. church. Not some other place. She wants her church to grow, not theirs.

She wants her place to be doing the exciting work and getting the new visitors and starting the new programs. Of course, she might not consciously admit to all that. But the pit in her stomach says it all the same.

Wendy, without even thinking of it, had been comparing and competing with other believers. Pitting her own congregation against another one. Even though they both preach Christ crucified.

[14 : 00] Lastly, what about Marcus? In his new city, Marcus has been faithful to find a new church. But you know, he can't help always feeling a bit disappointed.

The pastor of his old church always seemed to speak right to him. And in his new church, he has a harder time connecting with the sermons. In his old church, he had a great group of guys who disciplined him.

But now, these guys, they all seem to be in different stages of life than him. And he's not sure he has a lot to learn from them. Nothing seems to measure up to his old church.

In fact, he still listens to the podcast from his old church on Saturday nights. But then every Sunday morning in his new church, he just feels more and more disappointed.

So you see, friends, even if today, our churches might not be ripping into factions around specific leaders, we can still let that same spirit of comparison and competition creep in.

[15 : 08] Whether it's pride over which Christian authors we do or don't read, or jealousy over whose church is attracting the most new visitors, or disappointment over a new church that doesn't match the memories of an old one.

And when we let these sorts of things grow, according to this passage, we're living like infants in Christ. In fact, Paul is so bold even to say that we're acting as if we're still of the flesh.

Now that's really strong language. The flesh in the New Testament means our old, selfish, sinful, unredeemed nature.

This text is saying that when we let that kind of jealousy and strife, this sort of comparison and competition creep in, it's as if we're living like we don't even know Christ at all.

It's as if we're living like the Holy Spirit isn't living inside of us in any way. Now Paul clearly addresses them as believers, right?

[16 : 21] He calls them brothers and sisters. He says they're in Christ even if they are infants in Christ. In other words, he considers them to be Christians. But then he turns around and says they're of the flesh.

So is Paul contradicting himself? Are they Christians or not? Well, I think in some sense that's the point he's trying to make.

Paul's saying that when you and I as believers live like this, riddled with comparison and jealousy, caught up with strife and competition, it's like we're walking contradictions.

Walking contradictions. We know Christ but we're not living like it. We have the spirit, we're a new creation but we're acting like mere humans, like our old sinful selves.

God's. Now as an aside, some people have thought that in this passage Paul is teaching that there can be such a thing as a genuine Christian who never really pursues holiness and lives just like the world their whole life and yet will still be saved in the end.

[17 : 43] this was sometimes referred to as a carnal Christian as opposed to a spirit-filled Christian. Carnal being another way of translating of the flesh in our passage.

But I think it's clear that Paul's actually not teaching that here. Isn't it? He's not trying to introduce two sort of categories of Christians here.

No, he's saying there's one sort of Christian, the growing kind. And if you're not growing, something is horribly wrong. Beth and I just had an infant.

And friends, if our infant never grew up and started eating solid foods, if Owen always hit himself in the face like he does now, if he always pooped his pants like he does now every two to three hours, friends, you wouldn't say, oh, that's just a normal human being.

No, something would be dreadfully wrong. In fact, Paul will go on to say in 2 Corinthians that if you persist in blatant, unrepentant sin and disobedience, then perhaps your conversion wasn't genuine to begin with.

[19 : 05] Examine yourself, Paul will say in 2 Corinthians 13 5. Examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith.

But Paul's not quite there yet with the Corinthians. Here he's still addressing them as believers. He's still trying to jolt them awake to get them to grow up by helping them to see how contradictory their lives have become.

Now, if we take a step back, it's worth asking, isn't it? Is all this really so bad as Paul makes it out to be?

I mean, come on, the Corinthians haven't killed anybody. They're just squabbling and one-upping each other through their petty little factions. It's foolish, sure, but is Paul just a little overreactive here?

I mean, who cares if I get a little jealous at the church across the street? And who cares if I look down my nose at those fluffy, foolish books that those people are reading over there? And who cares if I put my previous pastor on a pedestal that no one can reach?

[20 : 28] Does that really mean I'm a walking contradiction? Well, friends, if we take the gospel seriously, then the answer is yes.

On the one hand, at the very basic level, these kinds of divisions in the church misrepresent the God who saved us.

Amidst the three eternal persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is perfect unity. So perfect that Christians believe not in three gods, but in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And if the church is meant to be a reflection of the glory of the God who saved us, then that partly happens through reflecting God's supreme, beautiful, lovely unity.

Divisions in the church are serious friends because they tell a lie to the watching world about who God is. God is not a God of strife and conflict, but a God of perfect unity.

[21 : 50] But pushing a little deeper, there's another reason why divisions are such a contradiction to the gospel. people. Because underneath all the jealousy, the strife, the comparison, the competition, what I'm doing in all that is putting my identity and my significance in a human person and in so doing trying to make much of myself.

When the Corinthians said I'm of Paul or I'm of Apollos, don't you see what they were doing? They were getting their self-worth and their status from their attachment to those human leaders and they were trying in doing that to make themselves better than each other through some sort of connection to this or that popular teacher.

And in the same way, when you are jealous or suspicious of another local church or ministry across town, when you only read certain books and not others, when you're unimpressed by your current church or even more generally, when you compare yourself to someone else in any way and when you see yourself as being in competition with them, then your focus and your praise is on you, is it not?

how significant you are, how you can be better than someone else. You're consumed with yourself and whether you're succeeding and you feel great or whether you're failing and you feel horrible, you're still all about you.

and when we do that, we've completely lost sight of the truth of the gospel because at the center of the gospel is not me and it's not you but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

[24 : 05] we preach Christ crucified, Paul said in chapter one. That's the central message of Christianity that we were so helpless and sinful that only the death of God's perfect beautiful son could save us.

But at the same time, God loved us so much that he willingly gave his son and that the son willingly came to do just that, to die on the cross for the sins of absolutely everyone who will turn and trust in him.

We bring him nothing no matter who we are and he gives us everything no matter who.

we are. That's the good news of the gospel, friends. And when God by the Holy Spirit causes that reality to sink down into your heart, it will be the death knell to all comparison and competition.

Why? Because now instead of having to belong to this leader or that leader to prop yourself up with theological tomes, to get your significance or your worth, instead of needing to build yourself up and prop yourself up in this way or that way, you can rest on the great and glorious fact that now you belong to God.

[25 : 47] You're God's field, Paul says at the end of our text. Christ, you don't belong to Paul or Apollos, you don't even belong to yourself, whether you're a total success worldly speaking or a total failure.

And the gospel were all the same. You belong to God. He defines you now. Just like Isaiah saw so many years ago that God would pour out his spirit and we would be writing on our hands, the Lord's and we would grow up like a field in the desert full of life and beauty.

Verses five through nine, the end of our text are there to give us some much needed perspective. Christian leaders aren't celebrities, Paul says, they're servants.

They're field workers and God has sent them out each with their own task, each in their own time. One plants, one waters, in and of themselves, they're nothing.

Ultimately, it's only God who gives the growth. And these laborers, they're on the same team. They're one. They're fellow workers.

[27 : 10] Yes, they'll receive their individual wages for the work they've done, but ultimately they work together in the field that belongs to God. Brief side advertisement, if you're thinking about going into ministry, this is the calling, not glamour.

Pick up your shovel and hit the fields. So friends, if you're tempted to make too much of a Christian leader, to get your significance through your connection to them, you need to remember that they're merely servants, they're farm hands, and it's God who gives the growth.

pastors and teachers are means. Be thankful for their faithful labors. Yes, honor them appropriately.

Yes, but don't worship them. And when we're tempted to pit my leader over against your leader, or my local church over against that local church, or my campus fellowship over against your campus fellowship, or my favorite Christian writer over against your favorite Christian writers, remember that they're all one.

Insofar as they hold to the biblical gospel, they're all on the same team. Yes, God will ultimately hold them accountable individually, but ultimately they're all playing their part.

[28 : 31] They're all doing the work God assigned to them. And friends, if we really internalize this vision, it means that we can be genuinely thankful for the plurality of gospel-believing churches in New Haven, we're not competing, we're cooperating.

We can encourage each other without unhealthy comparison, as long as we preach Christ crucified, we're on the same team. After all, if we're really going to see our whole city and our region reach for Christ, wouldn't you agree that we'll need God to raise up a lot more sowers and a lot more waterers.

We'll need God to raise up a lot more healthy local churches. And as you think about your own story in the faith, friend, be thankful for the teachers and pastors you've learned from in the past.

Praise God for them. But don't use them as the gold standard whereby you negatively judge all the teachers in your life right now or in the future.

In God's wisdom, one sowed and now by God's same wisdom, another is watering. Trust the owner of the garden that he knows what he's doing and that his timing is always perfect.

[30 : 00] So friends, if you see comparison and competition lurking in your heart, if it's coloring your relationships, then I hope you listen to the rebuke of this passage because that's what it is.

And I hope you'll set them aside along with the rest of your old sinful nature. Stop living as a walking contradiction and start living the beauty that God has ushered you into.

That you are a part of his field. The one awesome church of God that he bought with his own blood and that he will see forth into glory.

Let's pray. Amen. God, we pray that you would convict us now of these things in our hearts.

Lord, we know that we need your Holy Spirit to do that. We're so quick to excuse ourselves otherwise. So, Lord, would you show us in very practical ways now how we've been comparing ourselves to one another, how we've been competing in ungodly ways even in your church.

[31 : 29] church. And, Lord, we turn to the work of Christ for forgiveness. We pray, God, that we would have a new sense that we belong to you, each and every one of us, that we're equal before the cross, that you love us all, that you've shed your blood for everyone who believes.

And, God, give us a vision for ministry in our time that embraces not just our own little tribe, but all those who take the name of Christ crucified. And, would you raise up in this field of yours many new plants, many oaks of righteousness, many lush gardens, many fruitful trees.

God, would we see in our day great growth. God, would we not thank ourselves or exult in ourselves because of the work that we've done, but would we look to you, God, and praise you and say that it's you and you alone who gives the growth.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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