

Servants Together

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-15

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1-15

Devotional Reading: Matthew 13:3-9

1 Corinthians 3:1-15

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?

⁵ Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Today's Aims:

- **Facts:** to examine a passage that aims to reestablish unity by downplaying personalities and exalting Christ.
- **Principle:** to assure that all glory is given to Christ, to whom it rightfully belongs.
- **Application:** to help Christians cooperate with each other as they rely on God to do His work in and through the church.

Introduction

How do we know whether people are growing in the Lord? Is it because they attend all the church services, give a certain amount of money, or volunteer to participate in various projects?

To be sure, most church leaders would be happy to have more people like those just described. While such activities are important in the life of a local church, they do not necessarily assure spiritual health.

Although those in the Corinthian church were very gifted (1 Corinthians 1:7), they experienced many problems. We have already learned that the congregation was divided over various human leaders, and some were still enamored of Greek philosophy. Additionally, there was immorality (5:1) and litigation among them (6:1). The Corinthian congregation was in turmoil. From that standpoint, this epistle is very relevant for today's church. Sadly, it is difficult to find many churches today where peace prevails. One traveling evangelist said that most churches he visits either are in the midst of a conflict, have just come through a time of dissension, or are about to enter such a time. Such disharmony reveals immaturity

“CARNAL” BELIEVERS - 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

In chapter 2, Paul contrasted the natural man with the spiritual man, that is, the unsaved with the saved. Now he turns his attention to Christians who were immature in their faith. That he did not doubt their conversion is seen in that he called them both *"saints"* (1:2) and *"brethren"* (3:1), familiar designations for God's people. Although the Corinthian saints had received the Spirit, they were not acting like spiritual people. Paul therefore addressed them not as "spiritual" but as "carnal." The word "carnal" literally means "fleshly," denoting a worldly attitude.

The reason Paul could not address them as spiritual people was clear: they were still *"babes in Christ"* (1 Cor. 3:1). As in an earthly family, we begin our spiritual lives as babies. But this is not how we are to remain. If a newborn does not grow, the parents are greatly concerned, for they know that something is wrong. As their spiritual father (4:15), Paul was greatly alarmed by the Corinthians' lack of spiritual growth. Since it is God's will for us to grow spiritually (Heb. 6:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:18), a lack of such growth indicates a failure to add to our faith (2 Pet. 1:5-10).

1. How did Paul address the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 3:1)?

Babies need milk, not meat. As new converts, Paul fed the Corinthians the *"milk,"* not the *"meat,"* of the Word (1 Cor. 3:2). It was proper in the early stages of their spiritual development to teach them foundational truths. Now, however, the time had come for them to have a certain level of spiritual maturity in their faith walk. Paul should have been able to feed them "meat," or deeper doctrines (the deep things God-the meat of the Word), but they were content to remain as infants. When there will always be different levels of spiritual maturity in a church, there comes a time when believers should be capable of teaching others (Heb. 5:12).

2. Why did the Corinthians still need milk and not meat (v. 2)?

While the word "carnal" may bring to mind various immoral practices, the usage of this word is quite broad. When he spoke of the *"works of the flesh"* (Gal. 5:19), Paul included such sins as adultery and fornication but also idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, and heresies. Carnality has to do with a worldly outlook that is manifested in many ways.

In this case, Paul realized that the Corinthians were being carnal in the envy, strife, and division existing among them. "Envy" (1 Cor. 3:3) is the Greek *zelos*, which can be rendered zeal but here means jealousy. The word "strife" is the Greek *eris* and means contention, rivalry, and wrangling. According to Greek mythology, Eris was the goddess of strife and discord. "Divisions" is the Greek *dichostasia* and literally means "a standing apart" (Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Revell).

These manifestations of the flesh in Corinth showed that believers were behaving like mere men, that is, like unredeemed, worldly people. Such individuals can wreak havoc by creating disharmony in a church.

3. What does it mean to be carnal? Does this mean that the Corinthians were not truly converted (v. 3)?

Hebrews 5:11 provides helpful insight regarding the fundamental reason for this failure. Like these first-century Christians, many contemporary believers are "dull of hearing." This phrase refers to a lack of willingness rather than diminished mental capacity. Simply put, believers often fail to mature because it is not a high priority.

We may complain that we lack time, but we usually find time to do the things that we most value. We may attribute spiritual immaturity to a lack of growth opportunities, but Internet resources, distance

learning possibilities, and the availability of small groups through the church indicate otherwise! Ultimately, the extent of our maturity usually shows what we most desire.

4. *What are some things that you have allowed to hinder your own spiritual growth at times? How do you guard against these?*

Committed Brethren - 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Another evidence of their carnality was their elevation of certain leaders, such as Paul and Apollos (3:4). While godly church leaders should be followed (1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 14:7), they should not be unduly exalted, for that tends to divide God's people. As we learned earlier, the church was split into at least four groups (1 Cor. 1:12). Factionalism is always an evidence of carnality.

5. *How did Paul view himself and Apollos? Were these two men competing with each other (v. 5)?*

Since Paul was the first to preach the gospel in Corinth, it was appropriate for him to be seen as a planter. Apollos came later, and it is likely that his primary task was that of teaching new believers. Therefore, he "watered" what Paul had previously planted. Of course, most Christian workers are involved in both evangelism (planting) and edification (watering). While Paul and Apollos were vital in the earliest days of the congregation, others would later assume leadership and ministry roles.

Whatever roles Paul, Apollos, and others played in the founding and growth of the Corinthian church, God was not to be forgotten. Without God's blessing on the field planted, there would be no growth.

Both church leaders and members must remember that we cannot make the church grow; only God can do that. However, this does not mean that we should not put forth our best efforts in preparing the field, planting the seed, watering, and cultivating. We must scatter the seed of God's Word, but we do not control whether it will produce a harvest (Mark 4:14-20). When it takes root, let us not take credit for what God did. To Him alone belongs the glory.

6. *Who was responsible for the growth of the Corinthian church? What does this say to us (vs. 6,7)?*

Too often Christians have set one church leader against another. Those preaching the Word or otherwise serving as church leaders, workers, or teachers must recognize that we are all serving the same Lord with the same goals. As Matthew Henry says, "The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, employed by one Master, busied in one work, in harmony with one another, however they may be set in opposition to each other by factious party-makers."

While church ministries may differ in many ways, "every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour" (v. 8). Those serving God frequently discover that earthly rewards may be few and far between; however, we are not serving men and women, but God. In His own time the Lord will reward His servants. Our goal should be to hear the commendation of our Lord: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23).

7. *What is meant by "he who plants and he who waters are one" (v. 8)?*

Paul and Apollos, as well as other leaders of the church, are co-laborers. They work together on the same team, striving to accomplish the same purpose. Even more importantly, in this endeavor they are also coworkers with God. What a vast thought: they are working side by side with their creator at His invitation! Their joy is seeing their work blessed by God and growing as He gives it increase.

The church is God's husbandry, that is, God's cultivated field. The growing church represents a harvest that belongs to God (compare Matthew 13:3-9). Using another type of imagery, Paul says the church is

also God's building. Each of God's workmen helps to construct it, but the building itself belongs to God. Paul expands on this picture in the next several verses.

8. What two analogies did Paul use for God's people (v. 9)?

Careful Builders - 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

In the ancient world the master builder has the responsibility of conceiving what a building should look like, setting out the foundation, and supervising the workmen. As the master builder of the church in Corinth, Paul laid the spiritual foundation on which the new congregation was built. It was his faithful preaching that called the church there into existence.

Only by the "grace of God" is the man who had once persecuted the church now allowed to become one who lays the foundation of new congregations! Paul accepted his role as the wise master builder of churches in Asia Minor and in Greece, but he never forgot that this role was given to him. He had done nothing to deserve it (compare 1 Corinthians 15:10).

Paul was not the kind of missionary to hang around in any one place too long with any one church. His task was to keep moving and planting new churches (Romans 15:20-24). When God led Paul to continue his missionary journeys, the task of building upon the work in Corinth necessarily fell into other hands. Those who followed Paul had to be aware of this caution: "let every man take heed how he" continues the building project.

9. How was Paul a "master builder" (v. 10) with regard to the church in Corinth?

The most important thing for Paul and for those who follow him is that the church must be built on the right foundation. The foundation chosen by God and recognized by Paul is Jesus Christ. It is the sovereign decree of God that no one can lay any other foundation (Isaiah 28:16; 1 Peter 2:4-6).

Wherever and whenever we may try to establish churches, the foundation must always be Jesus Christ. The truth that He is the Messiah (Matthew 16:16), the reality that He is the Son of God (John 5:17-23), and the fact that He died on the cross and rose from the dead-this is the bedrock upon which Christianity stands.

10. Who is the true foundation of the church? Why is this important (v. 11)?

When a foundation has been laid, then each worker has the responsibility to build upon this foundation with certain material. The worker may be found adorning the structure with costly materials such as gold, silver, or precious stones in a given building project. Or perhaps the worker may decide to use ordinary wood, or even cheap materials such as hay or stubble. In each instance the worker chooses the material and then is held responsible for the result. As we join the ongoing project of building the church of God, we should be careful to use our very best. Our commitment to live in God's truth and our sacrifices for that cause should be as if they were gold, silver, and precious stones. Any lesser effort would be like the wood or even like the hay or stubble. The way we approach our task does make a difference, as the next verse (13) makes clear.

Poor workmanship with inferior materials will not stand the test on Judgment Day. As one observer said, "Holy shoddy is still shoddy." The test of the fire will have different effects on works of gold and works of hay!

In the context of the leaders of the church in Corinth, this means that when they teach the pure truth of God, they make a lasting contribution. On the other hand if they focus on men's doctrines or mere personal opinions, then their work will have no lasting value.

11. Are we as Christians accountable for our workmanship before the Lord (vs. 12,13)?

Godly people will be the ones who rejoice to see their work abide. They did not waste their time on trivial issues; they did not put major emphasis on things of minor importance. They built on the true foundation; they chose to use the most important building materials. Therefore their work will last into eternity.

God will reward such faithful workers. The exact nature of this reward is not stated. Part of the reward could be the satisfaction of seeing that their lives had made an eternal difference. Perhaps an additional reward in Heaven is in mind. Paul only assures his readers that there is a reward to be gained. The Bible does teach that there are degrees of reward and punishment (Luke 12:47, 48; 19:11-27).

On the other hand the work of certain others will not last. A teacher who does not teach the sure truths of God but wastes his time on insignificant trifles builds a house of straw. Such a person has not necessarily done evil things; rather, this kind of teacher simply has not done the best things. This person works to build something that will not matter in eternity.

Paul does not say that such a person will lose eternal salvation. We are not saved, after all, by how much we have contributed to the building of the kingdom. We are saved by the grace of God that is available through the atoning death of Christ that pays the penalty for sin. The kind of person in this context who "shall suffer loss" shall be saved, but the result will be like a person who has lost possessions in a fire.

12. What is the basis for a Christian's heavenly rewards (vs. 14,15)?

Conclusion

Working Together

Sometimes spiritually mature Christians will "part ways" from one another because of thoughtful, sincere differences of opinion. The split between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41 is an example. In that instance good things resulted as two missionary teams went out rather than one.

More often, however, division in the church is a terrible thing when the root is spiritual immaturity. But diversity in the church is a good thing. It happens when God gives each person spiritual gifts, talents, and abilities to be used in building the kingdom.

We should not feel threatened when other people serve God in ways that we ourselves cannot. Instead, we should thank God that He has designed the body of Christ to have such a variety of spiritual gifts. When we each do the work God has given us to do, we can accomplish great things for His glory. Paul was not jealous of Apollos's speaking skills, and Apollos was not jealous of Paul's church-planting skills.

Cooperation is key. We are coworkers with God and with one another. Like Paul and Apollos, we serve God in assigned roles. We cooperate with God by following His instructions; we cooperate with one another by lending mutual support. God does not just want us to serve Him; He wants us to serve Him together. If we can learn to serve God together with the same spirit that Paul and Apollos had, planting and watering according to our own specific roles, then God will give the increase.

Thought to Remember

United we serve.

Prayer

Holy Father, we ask for Your forgiveness where we have been selfish and separated. Help us to reflect on earth the beautiful unity that You have shown us from Heaven. Help us to have willing hands and loving spirits so that we can serve You together. In Jesus' name, amen.