

A Study of 1 Corinthians

Chapter 3

The Goal of Works in the Christian Life Is to be Rewarded

The Spiritually Immature Cause Division with Competitive Attitudes

Verse 1—At this time, Paul *could not speak to you as to spiritual men*, not because they were unbelievers but because they were *as to men of the flesh* (σαρκίνοις “flesh or carnal”) in reasoning and perspective about competitive rivalry in the church.

- Since they had become believers, they had not been growing in a way that leads to spiritual maturity. So addressing them within that realm was useless.
- Paul then qualified their fleshly state *as infants* (νηπίους “immature”) *in Christ*. They were living in the realm of childishness by adopting secular wisdom and then adapting to that by applying it to their Christian relationships.

Application

It's obvious that settling for salvation is not enough for a believer. Salvation gets one into heaven, but spiritual growth that leads to spiritual maturity is the purpose of salvation. Spiritual maturity is that process of full comprehensive development into the image of Jesus Christ, which is reached through continual growth. This is the purpose of all ministry.

Verses 2-3—Lacking maturity, they could not receive more advanced teaching that would contribute to their spiritual growth. *I gave you milk to drink* (basic and elementary Christian teaching), *not solid food*, and the reason is, *you were not able to receive solid food*.

- A spiritual man is one capable of receiving more comprehensive teaching of God's Word. *In fact, you are still not ready* for solid food—more advanced teaching that would develop spiritual maturity.
- The reason is, *you are still influenced by the flesh*. Not only were the Corinthians spiritually immature, they were carnal.
- The evidence for their carnality was *jealousy* (ζήλος “envious and contentious rivalry”) and *dissension* (ἔρις “strife and wrangling”) among you, both of which contributed to their competitive partisanship.
- This inability to get along showed their flesh dominated them. *Are you not fleshly?*
- So much so, in fact, *are you not walking like mere men?* unregenerate humanity without the Spirit's influence.
- The need to ‘grow up’ is the aim of the entire New Testament.
- A new believer may explain salvation as ‘Christ died for my sins.’
- A growing believer would go into things like justification, substitution, and propitiation.
- The first is *milk*. The second *solid food*.

Verse 4—An example of their carnality was the partisanship amongst them, *for whenever someone says ‘I am of Paul,’ and another ‘I am of Apollos.’*

- They were dividing themselves up according to ‘Paul’ an apostle-faction or an ‘Apollos’ Paul's co-worker faction.
- They were acting as an unbeliever, *are you not walking like mere men?*, just as humanity does without the Spirit's influence.
- The world bases itself upon factions in competition for prominence, influence, and power.
- Competitive attitudes between believers is an indication of thinking and acting fleshly.

- But the point of the spiritual life is to move beyond that.
- Remaining a spiritual infant is not an option. Divided loyalties around individuals is indicative of the spiritual immaturity of fleshly-dominated believers.
- If a believer remains a baby Christian long enough, he or she will revert to a fleshly life, become a carnal Christian, and assume worldly wise attitudes.

The Remedy for Division Is Understanding It's God's Ministry, Not Ours

Verses 5-7—*What then is Apollos or Paul anyway only servants through whom you came to believe, not the source of that salvation.*

- Even the opportunities to bring the gospel or discipleship are God's doing *even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.*
- While Paul founded the church *I planted* (ἐφύτευσα “to instill or implant”), Apollos nurtured that group of believers. *Apollos watered* (ἐπότισεν “to water or irrigate”).
- They were the means but not the cause of the Corinthians salvation. *God caused it to grow* and was the One who deserved the credit for any outcomes.
- We want our ministry to be fruitful. We want to labor in the field with results, but those are up to God. So there should be no factions *neither the one who plants counts for anything nor the one who waters.*
- For our part, we all get to participate with God in what He is doing in the world. Some get to plant, lay foundations, and inaugurate ministry. Others get to water, build on foundations, and nurture ministry, *but God...causes the growth.*
- Note the repetition—the point is, we labor for the kingdom, but God determines the fruit of that labor.

Verse 8—*So the one who plants (inaugurates), and the one who waters (nurtures) work as one.*

- Since the work is of unified action with a single purpose to facilitate growth, factions are counterproductive to the process of spiritual growth.
- God will recognize the individuality of our contribution to the spiritual development of believers, *but each will receive his reward according to his work.* We will receive individual rewards for our individuality of ministry to the body of Christ.
- It is our unique labor and not the fruit of that labor which is the basis of our rewards.

Verse 9—*We are coworkers belonging to God, not competitive agents building our own kingdoms. We are all insignificant compared to the God we are serving and His work we are doing. You are God's field, God's building.*

- God works amongst us and through us to build up His household. We are all responsible to God for our labor to mature Christ's body.
- Carnality sees it as our ministry, our kingdom, or our domain.
- The point is, God does not need any of us to accomplish His ends, but He is willing to use us. We can labor with God with what it is He is doing in the world.

The Quality of Our Spiritual Service Will Be Evaluated by Christ

Verses 10-11—*We are carefully building on the foundation Christ laid down by the apostle's, like a skilled master-builder (ἀρχιτέκτων “architect or superintendent as an apostle”).*

- Paul *laid a foundation* when he established his ministry in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18).
- The apostles laid the only foundation, and it cannot be altered. Paul did that *according to the grace of God given to me* and now *someone else builds* (ἐποικοδομεῖ “to finish the structure, a superstructure”) *on it.*
- So we are continuing that work today *careful* (βλεπέτω “to see, perceive or beware”) *how he builds* on that foundation.

- There can only be one foundation, with many ways to build upon it, none of which include using schism or rivalry.
- That foundation Paul laid and the one we are building on is *Jesus Christ and the testimony concerning Him* (1:6), and is not based upon Paul or Peter as leaders themselves.
- We are all doing the work of Christ together, not separately doing our own work in His name for ourselves.
- So factions are unnecessary.

Verses 12-13—There are various degrees of rewards available from Christ to *any man* [who] *builds on the foundation* the apostles laid.

- Depending upon the quality of the work, or possibly the motivation for doing that work, the building materials may prove to be durable, useful, valuable, and permanent, like *gold, silver, precious stones* or worthless, useless, and temporary, like *wood, hay, or straw*.
- There will be an accounting of *each man's work*, so every individual believer has the opportunity to build and have that work examined. The value of that work *will become evident* (φανερὸν “to manifest or make known”).
- The evaluation will be fully transparent *for the Day* (the Judgment Seat of Christ) *will make it clear* as to what is rewardable and what is not.
- Again, notice Paul's emphasis on future prophecy as a motivator for ministry.
- This is a judgment of believers works, not their salvation.
- The value of this work will be made clear *because it will be revealed by fire*. This refers to the purity of the examination and evaluation of those works. This will not be an arbitrary judgment, but one based in reality. The *fire will test what kind of work each has done* whether worthy of reward, or worthless.

Verses 14-15—It is works which will be examined and rewards given that specifically relate to that *which he has built on it* (the foundation of the apostle's work). Those works that endure this purifying judgment *will receive a reward*.

- The fact of receiving rewards is delineated, though not described.
- Works that endure will be of a quality that makes them eternally valuable. So the work at a minimum has had to contribute to the eternal welfare of others—their salvation, their spiritual maturity, and their discipleship (Colossians 1:28).
- *If someone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss* must refer to either the destruction of the ‘work’ by fire at the moment or the permanent loss of the reward that could have been gained.
- *He himself will be saved, but only as through fire* shows the believer will see the loss of his labor before his own eyes, but will himself be delivered from this judgment with whatever he has received, and take it with him into eternity.
- You only take your discipleship with you after death. That discipleship, after examination by Christ, supplies what you take with you into your eternal life, the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Rivalry and Division Are Inconsistent with Christ and the Apostle's Work

Verses 16-17—So now we come back to the original idea of factions and divisions. *Do you not know that you are God's temple*, that is, all you believers in Corinth, *And that God's Spirit lives in you*, making them the Temple of God, that place where the Spirit indwells collectively.

- *If someone destroys that temple* (God's people indwelt by the Holy Spirit), by applying the wisdom of this age to the church, *God will destroy* (φθερεῖ “to ruin or perish”) *him*.
- This is very strong language to warn that anyone who corrupts or damages believers can expect decisive temporal judgment from God.

- Some in Corinth had died eating sinfully at the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 11:30) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5ff) are examples of God's temporal judgment. It is a very serious thing to injure Christ's body *for God's temple is holy, which is what you are*.
- Factions, dissensions, and discord, as tools of secular wisdom, are unacceptable for the people of God to wield. This harsh warning should motivate believers to avoid applying secular wisdom to life within the family of God and competing with God's wisdom for His people.

Verses 18-20—*So let no man deceive himself.*

- You can destroy yourself as the temple of God by thinking *that he is wise in this age* (according to the world) which only reflects a natural man's mindset, demonstrated by division due to rivalry.
- Or you can become *foolish* (in the view of secular wisdom) *so that he can become wise* (according to God) by adopting God's viewpoint, demonstrated by honoring each other's service in God's temple.
- *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness* (silly and absurd) *to God* and that includes the religious as well as secular wise.
- Anyone who takes you away from the Bible as an authoritative and sufficient record of God's thinking, is destructive to the body.
- The two Old Testament quotes (Job 5:13; Psalm 94:11) about God *catching the wise in their craftiness* and *the reasoning's of the wise...are useless* verify that the best wisdom the natural man can produce is foolishness to God.
- Cited together, both texts testify to the futility of human reasoning apart from God's revelation, exposing the emptiness of that human wisdom.
- In 1:18-25, the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. Here, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God.
- So the choice is either be a fool to the world, or a fool to God.

Verses 21-23—Since secular wisdom is useless, Paul has concluded *so then let no one boast in men!*

- The wisdom of the world elevates or demotes people based on who they are, what they do, what they have, and how much power they wield.
- Think about this from God's point of view, for His servants are His gifts to us *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas*.
- In fact, *the world* belongs to us since we will inherit it and reign with Christ along with *life* and all it contains, *or death* that ushers us into Christ's presence, *or the present* life we live as a gift from God *or things to come* with its possibilities. The believer can profit from any dimension of life.
- These things encompass *all things* in life that *belong to you* as believers. All God's revelation is available to the believer so there is no reason to get caught up in man's wisdom. We have God's perspective on life.
- The assets of the Christian life far outweigh any of the world's. In fact, all the Corinthians *belong to Christ* not just to a Christ 'faction.' *And Christ belongs to God* so boast in God to whom *you belong* and who is the source of *all things* for us.

APPLICATION

The Bible was not written only to get us saved, but to get us righteous. The goal is a spiritual man not just a saved carnal man. Pursuing religious distinctions (with jealousy and strife over other Christian groups) is a sign of fleshly Christianity and is destructive to God's temple, His people. Instead, we should be working together, each of us seeing ourselves as a holy temple of God belonging to Christ, not independent agents seeking what the world offers.