

God's Fellow Workers

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

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July 5, 2009 – Trinity 4

Back in Chapter 1, St. Paul began by pointing out that the church of Corinth was in dire straits because of their divisions. Some of them were devoted to Paul, some to Apollos, and so on. And so Paul's gone on to show them just how foolish their divisions are and that's what we've been looking at for the past couple of weeks. Yes, the Corinthians were Christians, *but* they weren't really acting like it. They were full of the Holy Spirit, but at the same time they were hanging on, tooth and nail, to the very world that the Spirit was calling them to leave behind. They lived in a place where the study of Philosophy was really important, but it was a worldly philosophy that had no place with the teaching of the cross of Christ – and yet when teachers came, the Corinthians were judging them based on how their teaching and style squared with what the culture admired, not with the message Paul had taught them.

So for the last chapter-and-a-half, St. Paul's been trying to show them that what they consider wise, is really foolish – it's the *world's* wisdom, which means it's wisdom men have put together in accord with their own sinful desires, thoughts, and passions. God's wisdom, on the other hand, the wisdom of the cross of Christ, is real wisdom and they ought to be able to see that. That's why God has given them his Spirit – to clear their vision so that they can see the world's wisdom for the foolishness that it really is and so that they'll see the cross of Christ as truly wise. In Chapter 2 Paul told them, "You are "spiritual" people – you are people whom God has filled with his Spirit and because of that you have the mind of Christ!"

And so now he brings the argument back to their divisions. In 2:16 he just said that because they have the Spirit they have the mind of Christ. And from there he goes on. Look at 3:1-4:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

Ouch! All along Paul's been telling them that they are spirit-filled people, but now he says: "You might be full of the Spirit, *but you're not acting like it*, and because of that I'm having to go back to the basics with you. Instead of moving on from the basics of the Gospel, of the message of the cross, I'm having to go back to that message because you don't seem to be getting it. You're not acting like Christians, so I'm having to address you as if you weren't – as if you were still people of the world. You have the mind of Christ, but you're not living it!

Paul had spent a year and a half with them, teaching the message of the cross. They should have been maturing in their faith and becoming increasingly Christ-like. By now Paul ought to be able to start teaching them some of the deeper things of the faith, but he can't. They don't get it. They're still baby Christians. It is okay to be a baby Christian – *if you're really a baby Christian*. But it's not okay for a baby to be a baby when he's five, ten, fifteen, twenty years old. Every Christian needs to mature in their faith – and that's what happens as we live out the reality of having the mind of Christ. He goes on:

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?

Hebrews 5 and 6 talks about this same problem of spiritual babyhood and describes this "milk" as "the elementary doctrines of Christ." The most basic of those doctrines is the Gospel message itself in terms of how you become a Christian. Hebrews also includes teaching on baptism and laying on of hands, on the resurrection and on the final judgement as "milk." Those are the things we need to understand *to become* Christians.

Meat, on the other hand, is teaching and preaching that unfolds the riches and glory of the gospel so that people grow up. They stop being babies and start really living the new life they have in Christ. St.

Paul says in Ephesians 4:14, "that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." How do you grow out of being carried away by human cunning and every wind of doctrine? You nourish yourself with the meat of the Word.

"Christ died for my sins." That's milk. "I died with Christ to sin." That's meat! That's what frees us from the habits and attitudes and desires of the flesh that cling to us. The knowledge of the *gifts* of the Spirit. That's milk. The Corinthians were doing great there. Paul said he was thankful that they were "not lacking in any spiritual gift." But miracles, healing, prophecy, tongues – all that stuff – that's milk. What they didn't understand was how to live the *fruit* of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's *meat*. Later in 1 Corinthians Paul goes on to talk about those gifts of the Spirit, but then he says: "I'll show you a *more excellent way: love*." Becoming Christ-like. That's meat.

Paul's evidence against them is the jealousy and strife that are present at Corinth – the fact that they're competing with each other, dividing up, and forming factions. That's the way the world works, but it's not how the Church works. Ministry isn't about being top-dog. It's not about rivalry. It's not about jealousy. It's not about doing your work to be praised by others. It's not about being afraid that that person or that congregation over there is going to do more for the Kingdom. The Church is about working *together* to fulfil the mission Christ has given us.

Paul goes on in verses 5-9:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? 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.

There are two important principles here that have to do with ministry and our life together as the Church as we use our gifts

and live the fruit of the Spirit. The first is *servanthood*. The Corinthians were putting their favourite preachers on pedestals. (I think we can say that we have the same problem two thousand years later.) And so Paul asks: What am I? What is Apollos? Are we big-shots? Are we better or more important than you? And the answer is “No.” We’re *servants* doing God’s work. He sent us to come and preach to you. It wasn’t our idea. It wasn’t our message. It was God’s idea, God’s message, and ultimately all God’s doing. Remember Paul made a point earlier to say that he came with all his shortcomings to preach a message that was foolishness to the world. The fact that anyone in Corinth believed the message ought to be a reminder that while we do the work – even if it’s St. Paul himself – that it’s God who brings it about in the first place and God who produces fruit in the end.

He uses this analogy: He came and planted the seed and Apollos watered it. Can Paul take credit for the fruit? No. Sure, he planted the seed, but if it hadn’t been watered, it wouldn’t have grown. Can Apollos take credit? No. If Paul hadn’t planted the seed, there wouldn’t have been anything to water. And so with the rest of us. Some might have more high profile roles to play. Some may have a very visible position and others might work behind the scenes. One person might reap the harvest, and yet how many others have been sowing seed, watering, weeding, and tending the plants as they grow? *Every* one of us has his or her place and together we’re all servants of God as long as we’re faithful in giving our talents and gifts over to his service.

And really, there’s nothing more exciting or uplifting than that. Consider the privilege of being a fellow worker with God. Someday when we stand before our Lord, the greatest honour ever given us will have been that we have been bearer of his name and that we’ve been instruments of grace here on earth.

At the end of verse 9 Paul switches analogies from growing crops to raising a building. Think of all the people and different skill sets that go into construction. Each one has his place and all of them are important if you want to pass your final inspection. Look at verses 10 and 11:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

What we build and how we do it is just as important as that we build. God doesn’t call us and equip us to go out and do our own thing. He’s calls and equips us *to build his Church*, and for that reason the foundation has to be Jesus Christ: his person, his life, his teachings, his resurrection, his ascension, his sending of the Holy Spirit, his second coming. If you build on anything else, you’re not building the Church. If you build on anything else, what you’re building is eventually going to fall apart.

That’s why it’s so critically important that each of us be firmly grounded in Scripture. The Bible is the only means we have of truly knowing Jesus Christ. God calls us to build and he’s given us the blueprints in Holy Scripture. If you don’t know the plans, how are you going to build? And yet there are a lot of Christians out there swinging their spiritual hammers, but who haven’t studied the blueprints. How many builders start construction with no plans? How many of them build and only take a look at the plans once or twice a week? And yet that’s what we do when we fail to read, study, memorise, and meditate on God’s Word. If we’re not doing that, we’re swinging our hammers in vain – if we’re swinging them at all. Chances are, if we’re not in the Word, we’re probably just sitting around letting the tools God has given us rust. The most critical thing we can do as Christians is to immerse ourselves in the blueprints – in the Scriptures. We need to be spiritual sponges, soaking up the truths of the Word. If we don’t, we’ll either shrivel up or we’ll soak up the closest thing around – and that’s the world’s foolishness.

What are we building with? Are we following God’s plans or the world’s? It’s important, because Paul says, “Eventually there will be a final inspection. Will you pass?” Look at verses 12-15:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood,

hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Our divine building inspector is a little different than the earthly ones we have here, because on that last day, he’s going to set fire to the building to see if we were building for eternity or not. And that’s the question. First: Are you building on Christ as your foundation? And second: Are you building for eternity. Are you building with gold, silver, and precious stones or are you building with things that are going to decay or burn up: wood, hay, and straw?

The things that will last are the wisdom of God – the things he tells us in Scripture. The things that will burn up are the wisdom of the world. Paul’s saying, “You Corinthians are lacking in no spiritual gift – you have *all* the tools. The question is: What are you doing with them? Are you taking advantage of those gifts to build up yourself? Or are you using those gifts as tools to build up the Church? Are you using your gifts and talents to make a name for yourself? Or are you using them to make a name for God and for his Kingdom?”

In Second Corinthians, Paul reminds them that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10). In Revelation, St. John describes the Lord to whom we will have to answer: “His eyes are like flames of fire” (1:14). Those flaming and searching eyes are going to examine our Christian lives, what they’ve been made of, what we’ve been building with. Back in 2 Corinthians Paul says, “Then each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” – whether we’ve been building on God’s wisdom or the world’s wisdom. If we’ve been building with God’s wisdom, it’s going to survive the judgement, but if it’s build on the world’s standards and ideas, it’s going to go up in smoke – that we wasted the precious time God gave us here on earth.

Paul doesn't say specifically what the reward is going to be, but he does hint at it in 1 Thessalonians 2:19 when he says, "Are you not our crown of rejoicing?" I think the reward is that simple: joy. Joy in having spent your life in a way that counts, doing God's work. I've said it before. The Westminster Catechism sums it up best when it says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That's the reward: joy in God and in the knowledge that we serve him and give him glory. That's what the Christian life is all about.

There's a great reward in building for God, but Paul concludes with a warning. Look at verses 16 and 17:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

We need to understand that we're not just building any old thing. We're building the very temple of God. It's the place where his Spirit dwells and that temple is us – the Church – the collective people of God as the body of Christ. And here his warning comes back to his first point about divisions and strife in the Church – in the Temple of God:

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

You can see Paul pointing his finger at the ring-leaders of the divisions in Corinth: You guys are supposed to be building God's Temple, but instead you're tearing it down. The Greek word that the ESV translates as "destroy" is usually translated "corrupt." Either way it paints a vivid picture. The Corinthians are supposed to be building a Temple for the Spirit, and yet there were those in the church who were instead pulling down the walls and others who were, to use Paul's earlier imagery, corrupting the building by using wood, hay, and straw while others are building it with gold, silver, and precious stones. Ultimately what they're doing is corrupting the Temple and making it ineffective for its ministry.

Think about that. What are our primary goals as a Church? We're here to glorify God by building each other up in the faith, encouraging each other, and to be a witness to the world of the power of Jesus

Christ. And yet if we're divided, squabbling, and unrepentant in sin like the Corinthians were, how does that further our mission? The bottom line is that it doesn't. In fact it works against our mission. You can't exhort one another while fighting with each other; and proclaiming the saving power of Christ to the world with our mouths while living in unrepentant sin and division amongst ourselves is hypocritical. So St. Paul warns: Those of you who are destroying and corrupting the Church had better watch out, because you're destroying the very temple of the Holy Spirit and God will destroy you.

Paul concludes this section in verses 18-23. He's reminded us that as Christians we have the Spirit, that as people with the Spirit we have no business following the world's "wisdom," and that those who would continue to follow the world's wisdom and corrupt the Church will themselves be destroyed. Now he says:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

See how he turns the Corinthian problem on its head? They were saying, "I'm of Paul" and "I'm of Apollos" and "I'm of Cephas." And Paul says no, folks, Paul and Apollos and Cephas are *yours*. You don't belong to them, they belong to you. God is working through all three of us and yet each of your groups is limiting itself to one of us and because of that you're not getting the whole picture, the whole message. Paul, who planted, his whole ministry is yours. Apollos, the waterer, his ministry is yours. And Cephas (Peter), the rock, whatever is of value in his ministry – that's yours too. The fact is that the whole world is open to you. Led by the Spirit of God you can go anywhere and God will give you things that money, that the world, can never buy."

Paul brings us back to the cross of Jesus Christ. That's what's at the core, at the centre, of our life as Christians. It's through the cross that we come to belong to Christ and that means that every one of us who has come through the cross belongs to each other. *We* are the Church. *We* are the Body of Christ. And that *we* doesn't just refer to those of us gathered here in this spot today, but to everyone else who has come through the cross and who has made Jesus their lord and saviour – past, present, and future, here and around the world. We all belong to each other. What does that mean? Remember our purpose as the Church, as the Body of Christ, as the Temple of God's Spirit? We're here to give glory to God by exhorting each other to maturity and by proclaiming the message of the cross to the world. That means we each have work to do. And it means that God has called us to do that work together, for a common purpose, using the gifts he's given us, and building up the Kingdom, strong in the fruit of the Spirit – really *living out* the mind of Christ.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you have gifted each and every one of us uniquely. We ask that you would move us by your Word and by your Spirit that we might know how to put those gifts to use and that we would do so, living out the fruit of your Spirit and showing the mind of Christ to our brothers and sisters and to the whole world. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.