

A Servant's Heart

The Point: Serve Christ with eternity in mind.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 3:5-15

1 Corinthians 3:5-8

Connection to the Point: Apollos and Paul had different roles, but what mattered was that God was behind it all.

Context. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul chastised the Corinthian believers for their spiritual immaturity, their lack of spiritual growth, and carnality (worldliness). He wrote that the Corinthians were like babies who could only drink milk even though they should have moved on to solid food by now. The evidence that they were acting immaturely and worldly was the fact they had created factions and were aligning themselves behind teachers rather than maintaining the unity that they had in Christ. Of course, the teachers they were supposedly following would not have wanted people creating these factions. Paul still referred to these believers as “brothers and sisters.” He still considered them to be Christians—part God’s family. All in all, Paul was circling back to the issue of disunity from the first chapter (1:10-13) and concluded that he, Apollos, and others were all servants of God (3:5).

Apollos (v. 5). In Acts 18:24-28, Luke gave several descriptors regarding Apollos. First, Apollos was a Jew. As such, he was very familiar with the Old Testament. Second, he was from Alexandria, a Greek city in Egypt founded by Alexander the Great. As a citizen of a center of both Judaism and Greek philosophy, Apollos was likely highly educated and very capable in the Greek language. Furthermore, he was eloquent and “competent in the use of the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). In other words, he was both an educated Greek-speaking man and a faithful Jewish man. He was also “instructed in the way of the Lord” and “ferve[n]t in spirit” (vv. 25-26, see v. 28). He was accurate in how he spoke and taught about Jesus.

While Apollos was accurate in what he spoke about Jesus, his understanding about Jesus was incomplete because he was only acquainted with John’s baptism (v. 25). While in Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla “explained the way of God to him more accurately” (v. 26). When Apollos went to the Roman province of Achaia (the southern half of Greece where Corinth was located), he boldly witnessed for Christ and was a great help to the believers there (vv. 27-28).

Servants (v. 5). The word translated “servants” (*diakonos*) is the same word that is used for the office of deacon in other places in the New Testament (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8,12). It’s related to the word “serve” or “minister.” However, Paul was not saying that he and Apollos held the office of deacon in the church. Instead, he was emphasizing that God was their Master, and they were His servants. In this specific context, they were servants who carried out the roles the Lord had assigned to each one of them in the tasks of evangelism and church planting.

Planted . . . Watered (v. 6). Modern churches often use the phrase “church planting” in relation to starting new churches. The phrase seems to have originated from this passage. Elsewhere Paul wrote about his unique calling to primarily be a missionary church planter—one who preached the gospel in new places (Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 1:17). Paul wrote that Apollos had the role of following up on the work that Paul started. The one who follows up on the work of the church planter is just as important as the one who plants. The Holy Spirit gives different

Christians different gifts and different assignments. All the gifts and all the roles are meant to serve the kingdom of Christ.

Neither . . . is anything (v. 7). Paul was not being negative about himself and Apollos. The entire Bible, including the letters of Paul, affirms the value of human beings. Humanity is the apex of God’s creation, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Instead of speaking negatively or disparagingly about people, Paul employed the literary tool of hyperbole to stress God’s role in evangelism, church planting, and discipleship. Paul and Apollos were tools in God’s hands and used for His purposes.

God who gives the growth (v. 7). Ultimately, God is the one who causes churches to grow through the processes of missions, evangelism, and church planting. In what is sometimes called mouth-to-ear evangelism, Paul explained in Romans 10:14-17 that God has a specific way He accomplishes that task. God is sovereign in both the salvation of individuals and in the process He uses for people to hear and respond to the gospel. People call out to God because they believe in the gospel. They believe the gospel because they have heard it. They have heard it because someone preached it to them. The preachers preach the gospel because God sends them.

Are one (v. 8). Churches and church planters are not in competition with one another. All true churches and all faithful church planters are working toward the same goal—to see the lost come to know Christ and become mature disciples of Jesus. Both do their assigned tasks under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:9-11

Connection to the Point: Regardless of who is serving, the believer needs to build on the foundation of Christ.

God’s coworkers (v. 9). The idea that Christians are God’s coworkers might mean that Christians work with God. It could also mean that Christians work together, and both Paul and Apollos were servants of God. While both are true, in this context the second option is probably best for two reasons. First, the next two phrases, “God’s field” and “God’s building,” clearly describe Christians as being owned by God. Second, in 1 Peter, Peter, quoting the book of Exodus, described Christians as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). The people of God are those God owns and has authority over.

God’s field (v. 9). Paul already had used an agricultural metaphor by noting that he had “planted,” Apollos had “watered,” yet it was God who “gave the growth” (v. 6). The apostle continued to use agricultural imagery by calling Christians “God’s field.” He may have been recalling Jesus’s parable of the soils (Matt. 13:1-23), or he may have been simply using a metaphor that would have been easily understood in a culture familiar with agrarian planting and growing. The people of God are God’s field in the sense that they will grow up spiritually as they manifest the fruit of the Spirit as they live out their faith through the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25).

God’s building (v. 9). By referring to Christians as “God’s building,” Paul was deliberately invoking the imagery of the Jerusalem temple—God’s special dwelling place among the Israelites, His people. However, unlike the temple which only priests were permitted to enter, the Holy Spirit indwells all Christians (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16) and believers are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17). God dwells among His people (Matt. 18:20)—even the church at Corinth with all its problems, immaturity, and shortcomings. The construction of God’s building continues as new stones (believers) are added to the structure.

Skilled master builder (v. 10). Great buildings in the ancient world required years to build and many workers. For example, the project of the restoring and expanding the Jerusalem temple initially begun by Herod the Great required tens of thousands of workers and took decades to complete. Workers might spend their entire lives working on one project and not live to see its completion.

By declaring himself to be a “skilled master builder,” at first glance it might sound like Paul was being arrogant. However, Paul began verse 10 by attributing his experiences and capabilities to God’s grace that were given to him as a gift. A Christian should view any gifts, abilities, experiences, or aptitudes they are given as gifts from God who lovingly gives good gifts to His children (Matt. 7:11; 1 Cor. 12:11).

Be careful how he builds on it (v. 10). Believers should perform the work of missions, evangelism, church planting, and discipleship with deliberate effort. The central focus of these efforts should be to build on the correct foundation which is Jesus Christ. The attempt to lay any other foundation would be fruitless. It would also be foolish, since once the workers lay the initial foundation, there is no reason to lay it again. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul admonished his readers for “quickly turning away from him who called you by the grace of Christ” and warned them that turning away from God would result in embracing “a different gospel—not that there is another gospel” (Gal. 1:6-7). Anyone who builds on a foundation other than Jesus Christ is presenting a false gospel.

That foundation is Jesus Christ (v. 11). By teaching the Christians in Corinth that the foundation of the building was Jesus Christ, Paul was clearly *not* teaching that the New Testament people of God would relate to a physical place or space in the same way the Old Testament people of God related to the temple and the tabernacle. Instead of a physical building, the New Testament people of God are being built up as the place where the Spirit of Christ dwells, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and as the body of Christ (Eph. 2:19-22). By dwelling among His people, Jesus also makes Himself known to even more people through the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20).

1 Corinthians 3:12-15

Connection to the Point: The only work and service that matters is that which will last for eternity.

Each one’s work (v. 13). While Paul could be referring to the “work” of the apostles around which the Corinthian factions had developed, the expression generally also refers to all who take part in the work of missions, evangelism, church planting, and discipleship. Paul mentioned “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw” as the building materials with which the workers build (v. 12). The first three are precious metals and gems that are valuable and last, while the last three are common everyday items that are perishable.

The day will disclose it (v. 13). By referring to “the day,” Paul was most likely referring to the second coming of Jesus. While ancient cultures did not have building inspectors as we do today, they did have laws and practices which builders were expected to follow that would ensure a level of safety and quality in the construction of buildings. God has expectations on how builders build the building of God, the body of Christ. When Jesus comes the second time, “with justice he judges and makes war” (Rev 19:11). His eyes are described as being “like a fiery flame,” meaning nothing can be hidden from Him (v. 12). In other words, the Lord will reveal all the works of all people in all nations. Jesus will judge the activities and efforts that were centered on Jesus and the gospel to be of value and eternal. Meanwhile, the activities and efforts that were not centered on the gospel of Jesus will be shown to be of no lasting, eternal value.

Revealed by fire (v. 13). In what is likely an allusion to the refiner’s fire of God that the prophet Malachi mentioned in Malachi 3:2-3, Paul invoked the image of a fire. The first three items (gold, silver, costly stones) will survive a fire and demonstrate they are suitable building materials. The fire will quickly burn up the three final items (wood, hay, straw). The purpose of these metaphors was to reinforce Paul’s central message that people must do gospel work in a way that is honoring to Christ. “The time of testing reveals the quality of the materials used in building the church of God. The ‘day’ refers to the eschatological day of judgment, when the work of each one will become evident. Fire is an appropriate image associated with the last day. In this context,

the purpose of the fire is not punitive but rather serves the purpose of testing and disclosing the true value of one's work for God.”¹

Receive a reward (v. 14). “In the ancient world, a reward . . . was granted to those who constructed the building on time, within budget, and according to specifications.”² Paul did not reveal the nature of this reward, but he was clearly not teaching works-based salvation for a few reasons. The Bible rejects the idea that people can earn their salvation through works. The immediate context suggests that Paul was referring to eternal rewards, not eternal salvation (vv. 14-15). Most likely, Paul was teaching that those whose ministries are built on the gospel, and not on the kinds of rivalries that were happening in the church at Corinth, will receive the reward of joy and thanksgiving in knowing that God used their work to call others to repentance and faith in Jesus. Furthermore, in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, “Paul explicitly connects reward with the final outcome of his converts. ‘For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.’”³

He will experience loss (v. 15). The only foundation worth building upon is the gospel of Jesus Christ. All other foundations are false. Ministry built on those false foundations will not yield eternal results and will not survive the final judgment. The factions at the Corinthian church that Paul condemned will experience just that. All the work of lining up behind Paul, Peter, or Apollos would only result in short-term, non-eternal results. That kind of ministry may result in large gatherings of people, enthusiasm, and excitement; however, in this context, all those short-term results are of no eternal value and will be burned up on the last day.

Be saved—but only as through fire (v. 15). Fire destroys and reduces flammable things to cinder and ash. But it also refines, burning away impurities in metals. In other words, the results of a fire are final and complete. By using fire as a metaphor, Paul was saying that God's judgment of the work of ministry is equally final and complete. But such judgment is not a matter of one's personal salvation, which is by grace through faith alone in the finished work of Christ. Those who have genuinely been converted through repentance and faith will be saved. However, all of their ministry efforts not based in Jesus Christ will yield no eternal fruit. Specifically, those believers in the Corinthian church who had divided themselves into factions by saying they followed Paul, Peter, or Apollos had received the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life in Christ. Their ministry work, however, would be shown to have no eternal value.

1. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 107.
2. CSB Study Bible (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), note on 1 Corinthians 3:14; p. 1815.
3. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 108.