

## 1 Corinthians 3:1-15

By the time we move into chapter 3, Paul has the kid gloves off and he gets down to some real business. He's not sparring with these folks in Corinth, he pulls no punches when he tells them a few home truths in the verses we're looking at today. The stuff Paul told them could so easily have been a knockout punch—he could've left them out cold on the canvas. However, he didn't floor them!

He only winded them, when he told them in no uncertain terms that they were playing church. They were messing around on the fringes of spiritual reality. They lived their life on the edge but still expected to enjoy the benefits and blessings of new life in Jesus Christ.

They discovered what many of us already know—you can't run with the foxes and hunt with the hounds. Their problem isn't only in themselves, it's also wrapped up in their attitudes to the preachers God has sent among them. We noted in chapter one that they idolise them and are forming themselves into different factions—the Paul group, the Peter group, the Apollos group, and the Jesus group. Paul hits the nail on the head when he spells it out for them in verse 1 that they are acting like this because they are totally immature. They are big spoilt babies! Paul wanted to feed them on solid food, they couldn't handle it, they couldn't take it, it was asking too much from them—all they could take was milk! That's fine if you're a little child, but you can't live on a diet of semi skimmed milk if you're an adult!

In verse 2 Paul laments their appalling lack of progress in their Christian life. It is abysmal. Their growth in grace is severely stunted—they should have been so much further down the road in their relationship with Christ, but their development is sadly curtailed for one reason or another.

The old apostle who has been around a few corners in his life is only too aware of their problem—they major on minor issues and are influenced by personalities, when instead, they should be immersed in those things which are important. You see, it's all down to

priorities. The fact that they spend their time doing what they're doing let's the cat out of the bag—they are seen in their true colours.

According to Paul, and he tells them more than once, they are 'worldly'. They're jealous of each other, there's an unhealthy rivalry among the various camps in the church, there's a lot of bickering and backstabbing going on as well—all in all, it's not a very pretty sight! In fact, it's disgraceful and disgusting; if they got their act together and put their energy into doing what they should be doing, what a phenomenal difference that would make.

Instead of impacting their world for Jesus, they're not cutting any ice at all. Their testimony is minimalist in its influence in the wider community. These guys, who ought to know better, are fiddling while Rome burns! What an awful waste. What a tragedy.

That's what happens when people take their eye off the ball. That's what happens when men and women lose their vision and become increasingly insular. That's what happens when individuals polarise and hive off into splinter groups, it's even worse when they do it all in the name of maintaining the status quo or guarding their evangelical heritage.

It's fairly obvious that Paul is devastated when he sees what is going on. The preacher man is gutted. He really is. He knows it doesn't have to be this way, he knows it can change, he also is a realist and if it's going to work it's going to take a fair bit of whip cracking from him plus a lot of spiritual resolve from them. As they say, it takes two to tango!

I think we'll pause for a short music break at this point, that'll give you time to reflect on your own situation and time to think some of these hard hitting issues through before we unpack a few more truths from Paul's remarks.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul asks a couple of rhetorical questions in verse 5 when he enquires: 'What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul?' You see, they were into name dropping in an incredibly big way – how far you

progressed in the church depended on which camp you associated with! He includes Apollos in the question along with his own name – two so-called big-wigs in the first century evangelical movement. Then he drops a real clanger when he tells them that he and Apollos are ‘only servants’. That’s all! There’s nothing great about them, there’s no reason in the whole wide world why they should be elevated ten feet above contradiction, there’s no need to set them on a pedestal – they’re only men.

Furthermore, they just happened to be in the right place at the right time and that had nothing to do with them either – that was all down to God’s marvellous timing. Paul and Apollos had the unsurpassed joy and privilege of leading many of them to faith in Jesus Christ – and that’s wonderful, but that doesn’t mean you treat them with cult or celebrity status. They don’t want it, they don’t need it, they don’t like it – so why do it? In God’s eyes, they’re only servants that he is willing to use in his kingdom enterprise.

With a neat touch, Paul expands his thinking in verse 6 with the delightful turn of phrase – Paul ‘planted the seed, Apollos came along and watered it, but it was God who made it grow!’ That says all that needs to be said! There was no rivalry between the two men whom God used in their lives – Paul and Apollos are just so glad to be of service to Jesus Christ that they don’t see themselves as anything out-of-the-ordinary.

At the end of the day, the two of them were simply doing their job—that’s what God wanted them to do. One sowed the life giving seed, the other came along and watered it. Ultimately, the credit must go to the Lord for he’s the one who caused the seed to produce lasting fruit in their salvation. They need to realise and recognise that is something only God is able to do. And it took the two men to be faithful to their task – what’s the point in watering a piece of ground if there’s no seed? Tell me, when you plant a seed in the soil, what’s the point in leaving it there – it needs to be cared for and watered if you expect it to grow into something! You see, it’s team work, it’s partnership, the two men together along with the living God!

That's why Paul makes the point in verse 7 that 'so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow!' Get the message, I'm sure you do. We are nothing, we are nobodies—but God wants to use us in growing his kingdom here on planet earth. What an awesome privilege is ours!

Paul continues in the same vein when he reminds them that we are doing it for the glory of the Lord. Ministry people have one long-term goal in view; they may be involved in different roles, like a Paul or an Apollos, but they have one purpose statement. At the end of the season, each will be rewarded according to his own labour—that's what Paul says in verse 8.

You don't have to worry about what I'm doing, and vice versa, there's no need for me to look over my shoulder at what you're doing. So long as I am where God wants me to be, so long as I'm doing what God wants me to do, that's fine! The reward at the end of the day will make it all immensely worthwhile. Pay day is coming!

In verse 9 Paul again indicates to them the joy of fellowship in Christian service. We are God's fellow workers, he says! That means, we work together, side by side, with the Lord Jesus. To me, that's a beautiful truth: we're not there on our own, he's in it with us. We're not in a competition to outgreen each other's thumbs, we're there to work together – the goal is to see a lot of people looking like Jesus!

If we are workers, the church is the field—and when you have workers in the field, the aim is to see that field ripen and mature into blossoming and productive plants. God wants each of us to rise to the challenge and be willing to dirty our hands so that his work might progress—he wants each of us to be involved in sowing and watering the precious seed—and, when we do our part, he's more than keen to do his!

That's a positive note to pause on for a short music break, when we come back, I want us to look at Paul's insightful comments in the next mini section where he focuses on building on a good foundation.

## MUSIC BREAK

It's great to see how Paul is quick off the mark to give credit to the Lord for his work in his life. The fact that Paul was able to do all that he did and able to achieve all that he has is nothing short of a miracle—a miracle of grace. He knows that grace has seen him through many unbelievably tough times, he's all too aware of his personal limitations but he knows that grace is available to him 24.7—in every aspect of his ministry, he has sensed the enabling of God's grace.

It was God's equipping that helped him in those early days of ministry. He sees himself as an expert builder in verse 10 not in any high-handed sense, he's merely acknowledging what he is before God and what God, by his patience and faithfulness, has turned him into.

He's done his bit and he's very conscious that others are also involved in the ongoing project—that's the thought behind the phrase: 'someone else is building on it'. In his eyes, this isn't a one man show—it's a company of people actively working and labouring together.

For what it's worth, Paul throws in a note of caution as to how we use the resources that God has given to us—he writes at the end of verse 10 that 'each one should be careful how he builds.' In other words, there is no place for shoddy workmanship. If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well. Nothing else will do, says Paul. It has to be quality workmanship, every time, all the time!

Again, in verse 11, Paul indicates the exclusive nature of the foundation. A building needs only one foundation and, writes Paul, the foundation is Jesus Christ. The church is built on the solid foundation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. When we think of his person, here is one who is unimpeachable, one who is perfect in every way, one who is incomparable and truly unrivalled. When we focus on his redemptive work, his is a job that is done. It is finished, complete. That's the foundation for the building—Jesus!

As the old song says: on Christ the solid rock, I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

This is a marvellous analogy that we have here—the church is a building, the foundation is Jesus Christ, and we are individual stones cemented by the Holy Spirit into the building. The work goes on and all over the world today, lots more stones are being added to the structure. One day in the ripening purpose of God, the last stone will be added, and then Jesus will come!

I think we'll pause for a music break and, when we come back, I want us to look at some of the challenges we face when we're involved on God's building site.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

The next few verses that we're looking at today shine the main beam on an upcoming event that we all must face. I'm talking about the judgment seat of Christ or what is sometimes referred to as the Bema.

Paul writes about it elsewhere in his epistles, for example, he touched on it in Romans 14:12 where he told us that we are all responsible down here because, when we stand before the Lord, we will be held accountable over there. By the time we reach Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we'll find out more of his thinking on this emotive subject as he writes in 5:10 of its personal nature. In that day you and I will be brought to book for the service we have rendered in Jesus' name. And there's no escaping it. There's no way we can opt out, or pretend it's not happening!

The assessment that will take place in that final day is one that will show up the kind of work that we have done—Paul gives us a list of six different materials that we can use in building God's church. The first three are highly desirable and should be viewed as worthy and permanent materials – they are 'gold, silver, [and] costly stones'. The second trio are less desirable and are classified as worthless and perishable materials – they are 'wood, hay, [and] straw'.

I'm sure you'll appreciate there is a huge difference between the two pairings. We can narrow them down to see them from a slightly

different perspective: for example, gold refers to spiritual service.

Gold is a symbol of the nature of God and it's when our service for the Lord is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's when my ministry is carried out with a single eye to God's glory.

Silver is sacrificial service for silver as you will remember is typical of atonement and redemption in the Old Testament. My ministry is of silver calibre when I serve the Lord from a heart that's full of love for what he did for me at Calvary. The third kind refers to costly stones: that's steadfast service, that's when we are abounding in the wonderful work of the Lord.

You can see that each of these are top-notch and when we serve the Lord like this, the Lord is more than well pleased. When our service is tested in the fires of divine scrutiny, on that final day, then we have nothing to worry about, it'll pass the test, no problem at all. At the end of the day, quality shows and quality counts!

It doesn't mean that we'll run around heaven with a big head and a swollen ego—it does mean that much more has been accomplished than we ever dreamed possible. You see, the Lord took what we offered to him and, because our motives were pure, he enhanced it and fantastically blessed it. That's God, and that's the genius of God's grace.

The sad reality is, you know as well as I do that there are times when we don't get it quite right, times when our hearts are not pure, times when our motives are ulterior, and there are times when we serve the Lord for what we can get out of it—service done in the energy of the flesh and service done to improve my image rather than bring glory to Jesus.

Wood, for example, is a reference to careless service. It's when we serve the Lord in our own strength, it's when I do it my way because it suits me to do it like that. It's when I want a pat on the back for what I've done. Hay is comparable to worthless service—it's big and bulky, it looks grand and showy, but it's not worth too much, in fact, if the truth be told, it costs us very little! Straw service is, quite frankly, useless service. It's when I do something for the Lord

because I want all the credit for it, it's when I serve him from impure motives, when my heart isn't right.

See what I mean—there's a world of difference between the two types. The first trio will survive the examination, the other group will fail abysmally and will burn before our eyes. I don't know what that does for you, but it really scares me, it frightens me!

O yes, we're saved, no doubt about that, but we're saved by the skin of our teeth and the amazing grace of God. Heaven is our final home—we don't lose out there, but we do lose out on our reward! We'll suffer loss and we'll know all about it. I reckon that implies our capacity to magnify the Lord will be seriously diminished throughout the millennium kingdom.

The resounding challenge for me from these verses is summed up well in the words of the poem: 'Only one life 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last.' Remember this: Jesus will only say 'well done' if we've done well!