

God's Field and Temple

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[0 : 00] Let me pray for the preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, it is your word that is powerful and efficacious.

Your word that's conveyed by your powerful spirit. Not the words of men. And so we ask God that your word would be proclaimed faithfully.

We pray that you would speak to us, address us as your people through this passage. And form us as your people who belong to you and honor you and boast in you alone.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So 1 Corinthians 3, 1-23. It's great to be back with you all. I missed you all. And eager to preach God's word to you this morning.

I once heard a story about a man who was just standing and maybe just got his office car at a parking lot in a shopping mall.

[1 : 04] And he saw at a distance what he thought was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen coming in his direction. And he told himself, I just cannot miss out on this opportunity.

So he told himself, I need to strike up a conversation with her. And he happened to spot this really expensive and nice-looking luxury vehicle nearby. And so to try to make himself look a little cooler, he kind of leaned on the car.

And as she came, he said, Hey, how are you doing? And she said, I'm fine, thank you. Now if you would please move out of the way so I can get into my car. And I heard another preacher use that illustration to talk about the fact that just some of the church leaders in the church act like the church belongs to them.

As if the church exists to make them look good when the church belongs to God. It doesn't even belong to them. Right. And so in the Corinthian church, it wasn't so much the leaders themselves who were seeking to claim the church as their own, but the people themselves had this erroneous view of the church.

And they were saying to themselves and boasting in their human leaders, saying, I follow Apollos, I follow Paul. And in this passage, Paul uses several memorable imagery to teach that the church does not belong ultimately to men, but to God.

[2 : 26] And his main point is this, that the church that belongs to God should not boast in men.

And so in verses 1 to 9, he talks about God's field. In verses 10 to 23, he talks about God's temple, really the two main images that he uses.

So first, Paul addresses the fact that the Corinthian church is God's field in verses 1 to 9. Chapter 3 flows directly out of chapter 2, where Paul argued that the true wisdom that we should seek is not the wisdom of this world, which is doomed to pass away.

Taryn talked about that last week, the temporary wisdom of this world. Because the Corinthian believers were pursuing the wrong kind of wisdom, and because of that, they were being divisive.

So Paul addresses their divisions in the name of their leaders as well, here in verses 1 to 4.

And we know from the contextual clues within this letter itself, that they, the Corinthian believers, were challenging Paul's own authority as to teach them, and as their apostle.

And in particular, they criticized the fact that his teaching didn't meet their standards of lofty speech, and the wisdom of this world. So from verses 1 to 2, we could further deduce that some of the Corinthians believed that they were so spiritual that they had graduated from Paul's preaching of the gospel.

[3 : 40] They belittled Paul's teaching as baby food, right? And they were seeking what they considered solid food, and worldly wisdom and speech from other places. And so Paul corrects this with biting irony in verses 1 to 4.

Please read with me. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 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?

And the reason why Paul couldn't address the Corinthian believers as spiritual people was not due to his inadequacy, but due to their deficiency. Notice the repetition of words like flesh and human in these verses.

He calls the Corinthians of the flesh or fleshly three times. He describes their behavior as human two times. And later in chapter 15, we learn that the Corinthian believers view themselves as so spiritual that they deny the necessity of the future bodily resurrection and consummation.

[4 : 57] And so Paul is really putting them back into their place when he says that they're fleshly and human. You think you're so spiritual that you graduated from my teaching. In fact, you're just fleshly. You're of the flesh.

Now there's a common misunderstanding about these verses that I need to address because all of our church members come from various different backgrounds and some of you may have been exposed to this teaching.

And what I mean is this. Some people argue based on this passage that there are three classes of Christians, right? So in chapter 2, verses 14 to 16, Paul contrasted the natural person from the spiritual person, right?

You guys remember that? And here in chapter 3, verses 1 to 4, Paul contrasts the spiritual person from the fleshly person or the carnal person as the old translations had it, right?

And based on these categories, some people argue that there is the natural person who is an unbeliever, not a Christian, who has rejected Christ. And that there is the carnal person, right?

[5 : 55] Who is a believer that is living in his own strength and not following the Spirit of God. And then there is the spiritual person who is a believer who is following Christ full-heartedly.

And sometimes this is described in this way, that the carnal Christian, so-called carnal Christian, accepts Jesus Christ as his Savior, but not as his Lord. And that this spiritual person, the spiritual Christian, is the one who accepts Christ as both his Savior and Lord.

So this is, some of you guys are nodding your head, you've probably heard of this before. And this three-level view of Christians misses what Paul is getting at because Paul's not saying that the Corinthian believers do not have the Spirit of God, right?

Because Paul addresses them as brothers in verse 1, which means he assumes that they are members of the family of God. And then by definition, then these brothers and sisters, it's in Greek, commonly the plural form of the word brother, it refers to both brothers and sisters.

And so Paul considers Corinthians brothers and sisters in meaning that they possess the Spirit of God because for Paul, there's no such thing as a Christian who does not have the Spirit of God.

[7 : 03] The very meaning of what it means to be Christian is to have the Spirit of God. So he writes in Romans 8, 9, you, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him, right?

What then does Paul mean when he addresses these Corinthian believers as people of the flesh, right? In verse 1, the phrase, as people of the flesh, is parallel to as infants in Christ.

So Paul is saying that the Corinthians were spiritual babies when he calls them fleshly. So they have the Spirit, and that's precisely the problem. They have the Spirit of God, but they're acting as if they didn't have the Spirit of God.

They're acting fleshly, as if they were of the flesh in a worldly way. And that's something that Paul is saying they need to grow out of. So they are spiritual in a real way, but their thinking and living give evidence to the contrary.

And so Paul claims that they cannot address, that he cannot address them as spiritual people, but as unspiritual people, which is ironic because they pride themselves on being spiritual, but they are acting in a fleshly way.

[8 : 09] And what is this fleshly behavior that Paul's talking about? He tells us in verse 3, For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

Right? Jealousy and strife are mutually exclusive with spirituality and maturity. You cannot be simultaneously spiritual and divisive because we share in the one Holy Spirit, and that leads to

profound unity.

So jealousy and strife that now characterizes the Corinthian church is evidence that they are acting in an unspiritual way. So Paul's not here giving us three classes of Christians.

Of course, there is a spectrum of immaturity and maturity among Christians, but the New Testament never teaches, and it consistently teaches, that there are only two classes of people.

Right? The people of the flesh and people of the spirit. And that's why in his second letter to the Corinthians, right, when he is addressing Corinthians who are still following afterworldly wisdom, he says to them in 13.5 of his second letter, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

[9 : 16] Test yourselves, or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you fail to meet the test. Right? So if you persist in the way the Corinthians are doing, what that shows is that they are not actually in the faith, that they are actually failing the test and they are not in Christ, right?

So there is no in-between category of carnal Christian between a natural person and a spiritual person. And this is important to get right because this misunderstanding about three categories of Christians can lead, on the one hand, to spiritual pride, and on the other hand, to spiritual complacency.

Right? On the one hand, some Christians can think that they are better than other believers because they are the spiritual ones while other believers are carnal. Right? They belong to a fundamentally different category.

Right? They live by the Holy Spirit while other believers do not. This misunderstanding can lead to spiritual pride. The truth is that they are not. No believer is fundamentally different from another believer. We have the same spirit.

We have the same baptism. We have the same Lord and the same faith. Right? Sure, there are varying degrees of maturity, but we all belong to the same class. Right? We're all Christians, brothers and sisters.

[10 : 26] On the other hand, some people can think that just because they believed in Jesus Christ and that now they are safe and secure and even if they don't live in obedience. Right? So they could think to themselves that being so-called carnal Christian is permissible and they could get into the mindset of fulfilling the minimum requirement.

Right? Oh, I kind of like being a carnal Christian. I could enjoy the pleasures of this world here and now and then I'll enjoy the pleasures of heaven later after I die. Right? But in the Bible, there's no such category as a middle category.

There's no such thing as a halfway Christian. There's no such thing as a partial Christian. A person that thinks that way is giving evidence of the fact that they have an unregenerate heart because people who are true Christians, they want to love God, they love God and they want to obey Him. So that's inconsistent to think that way. So Paul is not here rebuking them for being in a third category of believers. Rather, he's rebuking them for living in a manner that's inconsistent with who they are, their identity in Christ as spiritual people.

It's also important to note that while Paul talks about how he fed them with milk and not solid food because they were not ready for it, for Paul, the milk and solid food are actually one and the same.

[11 : 42] They are the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And this is clear from what proceeded in chapter 2 where Paul speaks of deliberately rejecting the wisdom of this world so that he could preach what he perceives what he calls the wisdom of God, namely that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again for our vindication.

And Paul's, when he says this here that he fed them with milk, not solid food, he's not admitting then what the Corinthians are arguing that there are things deeper than the gospel itself, more advanced than the gospel itself that he intentionally didn't teach them because he didn't think they were ready for it.

That's not at all what he's saying. That would be to confirm the Corinthians' misunderstanding of the gospel. And so it's the fact that they think that Paul's teaching is baby food, that it was milk, shows that they are infants in Christ.

Paul's not saying that, oh yeah, I just gave you baby food because you're acting like babies. He's saying the fact that you think my teaching is baby food shows that you are babies is what Paul is saying. And the Christians never advance beyond the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tim Keller explains this in a memorable way. He writes, the gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the

kingdom.

[13:01] It's the way we make progress in the kingdom. When we struggle with fear or anxiety, it's because we have not understood or appropriated the gospel and God's radical and providential care for us displayed in the crucified Lord.

When we struggle with anger or discontent toward people and our circumstances, it's because we have not understood the gospel of Jesus Christ which reveals the depth of our own sinfulness and our desperate need to rely on God and not on ourselves.

And when we struggle with spiritual lethargy, when we lack love and zeal for God and his people, it's because we have not experienced the depth of God's love for us revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ.

Because we do not know his love, we do not love him in return. Christians never graduate from the gospel of Jesus Christ. What the Corinthians needed was not a different diet but a different perspective.

The solid food that Paul fed them seemed to them like milk not because of the immaturity of Paul's teaching but because of their own spiritual immaturity. And because the Corinthians in their immaturity pursued wisdom other than the wisdom of God, this led to divisions and factions in the Corinthian church.

[14:24] And so Paul addresses this in verses 4 to 5. For when one says I follow Paul and another I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos?

What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. You could hear Paul's disdain for this kind of divisive slogans that the Corinthians were using, right?

What then is Apollos? What then is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. Paul's undercutting the Corinthian believers' infatuation with certain leaders in the church by teaching these leaders that they are merely servants.

And Jesus himself taught this in Mark 10, 40 to 45, right? He says, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them, but it shall not be so among you.

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be the first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, right?

[15:32] Servant leadership is the paradigm for Christian leadership and it finds its prototype in Jesus Christ himself. And the pattern of this world, the pattern of the rulers of this world is to domineer and to lord it over people under them.

But the leaders of the church must be servants of all. So why then do you boast about servants? They're your servants, servants of the Lord. They're merely doing what the Lord assigned them to do as the Lord assigned to each, right?

And a person cannot receive even one thing unless it comes from heaven. The servants did not merit or earn their rank or task. Rather, the Lord sovereignly assigned it to them. So there's no sense that in boasting about those leaders and holding them in such high regard.

So Paul and Apollos are merely servants through whom you believed. And notice how he says that, through whom you believe. So Corinthians are saying, I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, but Paul is reminding that, did you believe in them?

Did you get saved in their name? No, of course not. They are servants through whom you believe. You didn't believe in them. So why say, I follow Paul or I follow Apollos? And Paul continues this line of thought in verses 6 to 7 with a metaphor of the field.

[16:48] I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he waters is anything but only God who gives the growth.

So since Paul addresses the Corinthian believers here in the plural consistently throughout this passage, he's not thinking here of a conversion of an individual believer, but he's thinking about the planting of the whole church.

So Paul says that he's the one who planted the seed meaning that Paul's the one who founded the church and then Apollos watered it, meaning Apollos had nourished them by having a teaching ministry among them.

But the most important part of this growth process is not Paul and it's not Apollos, but it's God because it says, but God who gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is

anything but only God who gives the growth.

This metaphor is particularly appropriate. Hannah and I have notorious black thumbs. I hear that that's the opposite of green thumb, right? Anything green that comes into our house dies and that's part of it due to our negligence.

[17:57] We just don't know how to take good care of it. But even if we take good care of it, we can't in any meaningful sense claim that we made the plants grow, can we? Right? I mean, yeah, you can create an environment that's conducive to its growth.

You could expose it to sunlight. You could water it. But can anyone make a plant grow? No. The growth comes apart from us. In the same way, that's the point that Paul's making.

God gives the growth. Paul can plant something and Apollos can water something, but unless God gives the growth, nothing will come of it. So why give such credit to the people who don't deserve the credit?

The credit belongs to God. Glory belongs to God. For this reason, Paul writes in verse 8, he who plants and he who waters are one and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

This verse highlights both the unity and the diversity of Christian labor. Right? So on the one hand, there is no sense in holding either the planter or the gardener in higher esteem than the other because they have no independent significance.

[19:06] They are one. They're on the same team. They're doing different parts of the same work. But at the same time, they're going to be rewarded according to their work.

They're going to receive wages according to their... Each will receive his wages according to his labor. So there is a division of labor and each will receive their distinct reward.

So Paul's talking about both the diversity and unity of the work and he will elaborate on the rewards later in verses 10 to 17. And then Paul gives one final reason why the Corinthians should not obsess over various leaders in verse 9.

For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building. The word God is repeated three times here in this verse for emphasis.

And in the Greek, it's actually even more emphatic because the first word of each phrase is God. So if you were to read it literally, it says this, God's therefore fellow workers, we are.

[20:05] God's field, God's building, you are. So Paul's not saying that he and Apollos are fellow workers along with God. God, to say that would be to undermine what the point that he's trying to make and namely that God alone deserves the credit.

What he's saying is that he and Apollos are fellow workers who both belong to God. So NIV makes this a little bit more clear. He says, for we are co-workers in God's service.

So the emphasis on God's possession and ownership, God's fellow workers, God's field, God's building. In short, you are a field and God is the owner of the field and Paul and Apollos are just farmers, laborers, servants.

So stop your nonsense about I follow Paul, I follow Apollos and bring your focus back to Christ and his gospel. Too often, the leaders of the church, the clergy, so to speak, can pay lip service to the fact that the church belongs to God.

Oh yes, the church belongs to God. But for all intents and purposes, act as if the church belonged to them. We get possessive, we get defensive, and we use the church to enlarge our own prestige, our influence, wealth, rather than pointing away from themselves to Jesus Christ.

[21:26] And that, this doesn't mean, what Paul's saying here doesn't mean that the leaders need to abdicate all form of leadership and authority, they still need to lead. But as they do that, they need to recognize that they are under God's authority and that they are accountable to him.

And therefore, remember that God is ultimately in charge and that they are merely servants at his service working for his pleasure. In a similar way, some of the members of the church can also mistakenly think and act like they own the church.

I've been attending this church all my life. I'm the biggest tither in this church. I'm the most gifted member of this church. I serve the church more than anyone else.

But strictly speaking, the church doesn't belong to its members either. Strictly speaking, it belongs to God and it belongs to them only insofar as they themselves belong to him.

We all belong to God. The church is God's field. In the last phrase, he says God's building as well. That introduces a new metaphor and that brings me to my second point which Paul continues in verses 10 to 23.

[22 : 30] God's temple. In verse 10, Paul says, 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. Just as he described himself in the earlier metaphor of planting, as a planter, here he describes himself as the one who laid a foundation, meaning he was the apostle who did the foundational work for the Corinthian church.

He's the one who originally planted it, the first builder of the church. And this was no credit to himself because he insists it was according to the grace of God given to me.

Paul sees his own apostleship as a gift of God's grace. That's what he said in Ephesians 3.8, To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

And sometimes, as Christians, we can make much of gifted people, and I used to do this with Apostle Paul himself, right? We sometimes talk about his impeccable Jewish heritage, his peerless scholarly training, biblical training that he had.

[23 : 42] And sometimes we mistakenly think that that's the reason why God chose to use Apostle Paul in the first place. But for Paul, he never made that mistake in thinking that. Sure, God used his extensive training and background, but Paul never let himself forget that he was chosen as an apostle, not because of his qualifications, but because of God's grace.

In fact, he says he had no business being a Christian, let alone an apostle, apart from the grace of God. And Paul testifies, so it's no credit to himself, but never does he testifies that he didn't do this work in a haphazard way, in a careless way.

No, Paul says, I laid a foundation like a skilled master builder. There's a biting irony here, again, in Paul's statement. So first, he says, I was not an average, you know, run-of-the-mill construction worker, right?

He's saying, I was a master builder. He describes himself in that way. So that means he didn't, and secondly, he says he didn't lay a foundation in a clumsy, incompetent way. He says, he did so as a skilled builder, right?

And the word translated, skilled here, is actually the same Greek word that's translated as wise in different parts of 1 Corinthians. And the word wise, or wisdom, is a key word that recurs throughout this book.

[25 : 04] For example, in chapter 1, we learned that the Corinthians believers were seeking worldly wisdom, and they believed and touted their own wisdom, that they were wise. And knowing this, Paul says again, in this chapter, in verses 18 to 19, 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.

Right? So contrary to the Corinthians' claim and accusation that Paul's teaching was elementary and infantile, Paul laid the foundation of the Corinthian church with wisdom. He was a wise master builder.

So contrary to the Corinthians' claim that they knew greater wisdom, their failure to recognize Paul's wisdom in the wise and ways, the God's wisdom in the way Paul built the church, betrayed their own foolishness.

So Paul laid the foundation as a skilled master builder, and he says, now others are building on it. He says in verse 10, let each one take care how he builds upon it.

[26 : 04] So who does he mean by this? So who's building on the foundation that Paul left? We could assume Apollos, obviously from the earlier reference, but I don't think this is a reference to Apollos or Cephas or other believers that he has mentioned by name.

And the reason for that is this. If you look at verse 6, it says, I planted, Apollos watered. He mentions Apollos by name there. But here in verse 10, Paul says more generically, each one, let each one take care how he builds upon it.

And also in verse 6, Paul said Apollos watered, past tense, he watered the church. But here in verse 10, the verb builds is in the present tense, right?

So it's a reference to those who are currently, presently building upon Paul's foundation, not Apollos, because Apollos, we learned from chapter 16, verse 12, he's no longer in Corinth.

So Paul's addressing people in Corinth, the very ones probably who are causing these divisions, the leaders of the church. And he's saying, hey, take care as each one, how you build on the foundation.

[27 : 11] And why should they take care of how they build? Paul gives the reason in verse 11. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Christ. Right? We cannot denigrate the foundation that Paul expertly laid because that foundation is Jesus Christ, the good news of his life, death, and resurrection on behalf of sinners.

And there's no other foundation. You know, buildings collapsing due to, you know, inadequate foundation is a common occurrence even today, right?

One of the deadliest accidents in recent memory was in 2013 when Rana Plaza, which is a five-story garment factory in Bangladesh, collapsed, killed 1,134 people and injured 2,500 people. And several reasons were cited for the building's failure and the main reasons were that the building was built on a filled-in pond. It had a cross, it had a compromised foundation.

[28 : 14] And then secondly, the builders had used substandard construction material compromising the structural integrity of the building. Similarly, Paul says, no foundation can bear the weight of the church except for the person and work of Jesus Christ, which is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

if we build a church on the foundation of a charismatic personality, if we build a church on the foundation of a sleek and snazzy service, if we build a church on the foundation of marketing and managerial techniques, if we build a church on the foundation of pop psychology, if we build a church on the foundation of denominational traditions, if we build a church on self-righteous legalism, you might build an impressive social club, You might build an impressive nonprofit organization.

You might even build an empire, but you will not build a church. And the church built on such foundations will invariably crumble because there can be no other foundation than the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And because this foundation is so precious and worthy, Paul says in verses 12 to 15 that we have to take special care to build on it with quality materials that will last.

His reasoning is this. The foundation that we're building on is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who shed His own blood for you. He died to save you, and on that will you build carelessly with materials that will not last.

[29 : 57] That's the reason. Look at this in verse 12. He specifically lists six building materials in the order of descending value. Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, much ink has been spilled throughout church history to explain the meaning of these various materials.

Some people have allegorized each of these materials to represent some specific type of ministry. But such speculation is unwarranted because Paul himself never comments on the value of each of these materials, and he doesn't explain what they each mean.

Rather, the clue to this meaning is found in the immediate context itself. Look at verses 13 to 15. 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.

So testing by fire on the day of judgment is what Paul has in mind when he lists these building materials, and that's the decisive contextual clue.

[31 : 15] So when we keep that in mind as we read verse 12, you notice something. The first three materials, the valuable materials, they are not combustible. They don't burn, right?

The last three materials, the cheap materials, they are combustible, right? In fact, they so readily catch fire, they're the materials that are used for kindling, right? It's the wood, right?

Hay, the straw, right? And so what Paul is saying is this, right? That's Paul's point, that we should build with materials that will survive the fiery judgment of God.

Build with imperishable materials that will survive the test of God. And what kind of church would that be? Paul only tells us one thing, the church that is built in accordance with the character of the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so gold, the silver, the precious stones, they represent what is compatible with that foundation. And the wood and the hay and the straw represent what is incompatible with that foundation, all forms of worldly wisdom.

[32 : 16] So that means only the church that reflects the love of Christ, the truth of Christ, the mercy of Christ, the humility of Christ, the courage of Christ, the suffering of Christ, the power of Christ.

In short, only the church that is built on the gospel of Jesus Christ will survive that testing. And let's not forget the emphasis of this passage here, right?

Paul is not writing an essay on the different forms of acceptable ministries. He's rather writing a letter to warning the ministers, right? The church leaders, of course, but also all those involved in various forms of ministry in the church in varying degrees.

So he's telling them, if you build carefully on the gospel of Jesus Christ, you will receive a reward. But if you build shoddily on worldly wisdom, you will suffer loss.

Now, the idea of reward recalls what Paul said earlier, right? Remember, he talked about wages that we'll receive, like Paul's receive. And sometimes Christians have a hard time reconciling this idea of heavenly reward with wages for our labor, right?

[33 : 28] Because it's, oh, I mean, sorry, those two things are the same. So Christians at times have a hard time reconciling our heavenly labor and the reward for our labor and the wages that we'll receive with the free grace that saves us, right?

Salvation by grace alone. Are those two things mutually exclusive? Isn't salvation a gift? Freely given in accordance with God's grace? So what's all this talk about receiving a reward?

It's suffering loss, right? So those two ideas are not mutually exclusive. And let me explain it.

There's two reasons for that. So first, the reward that Paul is talking about here is not salvation, right?

Notice that both he who receives a reward and he who suffers loss are saved, right? Paul says in verses 14 to 15, 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. So both will be saved. So the reward that he's talking about here is not salvation, but only he whose work survives will receive a reward for that work.

[34 : 35] And he whose work is burned will still be saved, but only as through fire. And so I also have to, should explain this, especially in this neighborhood. So this verse is really kind of the lone verse that is taken out of context in justification for the doctrine of purgatory, right?

So the purgatory is what the Catholics believe, a lot of Catholics believe, to be this in-between state where after their death, Christians receive temporary punishment for their yet unpurified sins before entering heaven.

However, this passage has nothing like that in view. Because look at verse 15 again carefully. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

What's being burned? It's not the worker. It's the work. There's no mention at all of punishment or purification of the worker. Only the burning and testing of the work itself.

Think back to the last time you had to go through a fire drill because we live in a condo. We regularly have fire drills still. And remember when you first received instructions about fire drill, what did they tell you?

[35 : 44] Don't gather up your belongings. You guys remember hearing that? Leave everything behind. Just take yourselves and get out of the building as soon as possible. Do you guys remember this? Am I the only person that got that? I mean, so why?

And I was always wondering as a young man, like, but why? Like, I want to grab my stuff. Like, you know, why did you tell me to leave my belongings and go? And of course, the idea is that the fire is nothing to trifle with, right?

It could spread so rapidly that you might not even save yourself if you dilly-dally. So you should not take time even to gather up your most precious belongings. Just get out as soon as you can.

That's the idea, right? And that's really what's meant here when he says, you will be saved but only as through fire. A Christian worker who builds with perishable materials will still be saved but only as through fire, just himself with no work to show for it.

This verse is not about salvation but about a reward for a loss of our work. So that's the first reason why salvation by grace alone is not incompatible with this idea of receiving a reward.

[36 : 51] The second reason why this does not contradict the principle of grace is this, because even our labor is a result of God's grace. For example, Paul says later in this book, 1510, Paul writes, I worked harder than any of them though it was not I but the grace of God that is within me.

Right? Even the wages and rewards that we receive for our labor are predicated on God's grace not our merit. And because of that, even when we receive a reward for the work that we did, ultimately, we don't deserve the credit and we cannot boast about it.

God deserves the glory for it. So it's not incompatible with the doctrine of free grace. But what exactly is the reward that we receive for our work? I don't know what that reward is and I'm glad I don't because that means I can look forward to it all the more, you know, like a gift that you don't know what it's going to be.

You know, but the question remains, right, wouldn't all Christians be fully satisfied? I mean, they have God and they're going to be united with Him. So what do you mean the additional rewards and loss?

And the Bible doesn't give a specific answer except to teach that there will be some differentiation of reward. But I do think I can say one thing about the nature of the reward and that's this.

[38 : 13] I don't know what the specific reward is but I do know this is that the labor of love is itself a reward. Right? It's that we all like to serve people that we love.

We all like to give to people that we love and that is itself a gift to us, a reward to us to be able to do such a thing. Right? And so think about it this way.

Let's use this analogy and elaborate on it a little bit. Right? There are two builders and each was charged with the responsibility of building a house for his beloved father. Now, each had the same starting point.

the father had left them this foundation of inestimable value. Infinite value. It will never corrode. It's beautiful. It's eternal. It's glorious.

And then one builder built a house on it for his father and if it could be called a house it's shabby and it's made of cheap perishable materials and he took a lot of shortcuts in the building process and it shows.

[39 : 14] The other builder he built a house for his father he did so with blood, sweat and tears. Even though it was hard he only used costly, beautiful, sturdy, imperishable materials.

Many people told him hey, it would be a lot easier if you built it this way. It would be a lot quicker if you built it this way. But he always responded the same way that would not be fitting for so great a foundation which my father left me.

you would not be suitable for my dearly beloved father. So he labored on and the day of reckoning came and a fire swept through the town one builder's house was all burned up but the other house remained so that he could present it to his father.

The other builder has nothing to show his father. Isn't that in itself a gift?

Yes, by God's grace but that you can present something of work that you did yes, you could give it to him, show it to him. Yes, it's all a result of grace but isn't that a reward in itself and don't you desire that reward more than anything else in this world to be able to serve God, to love him, labor for him.

[40 : 45] Similarly, when our union with God is finally consummated in heaven we will all be fully satisfied in him and we will experience his joy but while some will have nothing to show for their life here on earth others will have the joy and privilege of presenting the fruit of their labor of love to God.

some will have because of that the greater capacity to appreciate the love of God and to express his own love for God.

That's what we strive for. That's what we labor for. Sorry. And note the timing of this test when all will be revealed is in the future and that's helpful for us because that tells us that we can't be an accurate ultimate judge of all the work that we are doing or even that others are doing until that day. The day that Paul is talking about is shorthand for the judgment day, the day of judgment and that's when the Lord Jesus will be revealed second coming and all the work that we do will be revealed for what it is.

But until that day we can't know. It's so easy as Christians to seat ourselves on the judge's bench and then to judge people's ministries and works and say, you know, oh, and then we elevate some Christians and put them on a pedestal and say, oh, wow, that person is doing great ministry.

[42 : 16] And then other people we relegate to the doghouse and say, oh, that person's ministry is nothing, right? There's nothing valuable there. But because of this, the fact that until that day, the final, the real nature of the work will not ultimately be revealed.

So we need to reserve and withhold final judgment, ultimate judgment until that day. And we should be slow to judge the works of others. We should be slow to judge even our own work.

And that doesn't mean that we don't exercise discernment. We do need to make some judgments and we do need to discern, right? However, we should reserve that final judgment and we should be slow to judge other people's work.

So then having warned about the day of judgment and having solemnly exhorted people to build well on the foundation of Jesus Christ, Paul takes it up a notch again, verses 16 to 17, and intensifies his warning by reiterating just how important this building project is.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

[43 : 24] For God's temple is holy and you are the temple. So here he tells us exactly what building project we're involved in. It's not just some random building, it's the temple of God.

And he says that's the reason why we need to build with imperishable materials like gold, silver, and precious stones. Gold, silver, and precious stones are the materials that are regularly used throughout the Old Testament to build the temple of God.

So again, that's another reason why those specific materials are mentioned here by Paul. And what is this temple? Rather, who is this temple? It's the church. It's you.

It's all of us. He said, do you not know? He's basically, this is what God's saying, do you not know how precious you are? Do you not know that you are God's temple, that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. Paul is taking things one step further here. Earlier, he talked about builders who are building with cheap materials, perishable materials, but their work will not last, but they're still going to be saved.

[44 : 31] He's not talking about here people who are building poorly. He's talking here now about people who are destroying the building, destroying the church. He's taking it up a notch. And he's warning the Corinthian business, if you keep doing what you're doing, building on worldly wisdom and leading the church to division, you're destroying the church.

And here's a warning for people who destroy the church. God will himself destroy you. Do you notice that eye for eye, tooth for tooth? The punishment fits the crime here.

They destroy God's church and God will himself destroy them. This passage does apply generally to all Christians since we all minister in some form, but I do think there's a special relevance here for the leaders of the church that are entrusted with shepherding the flock of God.

And this means that ministers of the church of God should serve with fear and trembling, right? Because the church that they serve is God's temple, indwelt by God's spirit.

And that's why in James 3, 1, the apostle warns us, not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

[45 : 45] Right? There's a saying among pastors, don't complain that your church is too small because when you stand before God's judgment seat and you have to give an account for each of the members of the church, it will seem to you that your church was plenty big enough.

Right? And for those of you who are not vocational ministers, I hope you feel the depth of God's love for you in this passage.

Right? notice how repeatedly and persistently God insists that you belong to him and to no one else.

Paul, even Paul, arguably the greatest apostle and minister to ever live, God tells him church is not yours, it's mine. Apollos, God says it's not your church, it's my church.

you are God's field, you are God's temple. Verse 17 says, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him, for God's temple is holy, and you are that temple, holy meaning set apart for God, consecrated to him.

[46 : 59] Right? Through this passage over and over again, God says, mine, mine, mine, my church, you belong to me. Do you feel God's zeal for you, his love for you, his jealousy for you?

If only we knew that love, it would totally change the way we think about church and the way we live. And after teaching that the church is really God's field and God's temple, Apostle Paul wraps

everything up nicely in verses 18 to 23.

So remember there were two main problems with the Corinthian church. They were pursuing worldly wisdom instead of the gospel, that was the first problem, and the second problem is that as a result of that, they were producing divisions and factions in the church.

So he addresses both of those two things in turn. In two parallel phrases, in verse 18, it says, let no one deceive himself, and then he talks about worldly wisdom. And then in verse 21, he said, let no one boast in men.

So he's kind of summarizing all his arguments over the last few chapters by rebuking their pursuit of worldly wisdom and divisions. So first, he rebukes their pursuit of worldly wisdom in verses 18 to 20. [48 : 05] 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. Paul's citing two different Old Testament verses, Job 5.13 and Psalm 94.11, both of which mention the wisdom of God.

And so he's saying this, God catches the wise in their craftiness. So if you think that you have life figured out apart from Christ, think again. If you think that you have the way this world operates figured out apart from Christ, then think again because the wisdom of this world is folly with God. And if you're not a follower of Jesus, yet then I may appeal to you to consider the foolishness of Christ crucified this morning. Because if you don't face up to Christ and his claim that he is the king who came to save us, who ascended the cross, which is the ancient equivalent of an executioner's chair, as his own throne, and for his crown were the crown of thorns, so he could die a sinner's death in your place to save you if you ignore this Christ in your life, it doesn't matter how successful you are, how wealthy you get, or how well regarded and wise you seem to appear in the eyes of this world.

God catches the wise in their craftiness, your own resourcefulness, intelligence, accomplishments, and diligence will be your own undoing.

[49 : 42] You need the Lord Jesus Christ. It's only in the kingdom of God where wisdom of the world is folly, and the folly of the cross is wisdom, only in the kingdom of God where weakness and humility are power, only in the kingdom of God where children of God who are nobodies possess everything.

only in that upside down kingdom can you truly find the power and wisdom you seek. And if you are already a follower of Jesus Christ, be reminded this morning that the church that belongs to God should not boast in men.

Verses 21 to 23, 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 death or the present or the future, all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

The five things that Paul lists there, what we might call the five tyrannies of this world, right? Life, death, present, future, the world, they're things that we are all tied to, bound to, but things that we cannot control.

Yet in Christ, like all of those things are ours, the key to life and death, the rule over this world, right? God's sovereignty over our present and the future, all of this comes to us in Christ.

[51 : 02] And that's Paul's conclusion here. He says, you think that you say, I follow Paul, that literally means I am of Paul, and you're saying I am of Apollos, guess what, you have it all backwards, you are not of them, they are of you, Paul belongs to you, Apollos belongs to you, and the whole church belongs to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Right here, so he's not saying here that Christ is not equally God as the second person of the Trinity, that's not what he's mentioning, he's talking about the functional order within the Trinity, and because there is an order within the Trinity in the way God operates, right?

The Father sends and then the Son sends the Spirit, the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, right? And the Father, right? It's the Father, the Spirit then glorifies the Son, and then the Son's glory then redounds to the Father.

Philippians 2, 10-11 talks about how at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So in the end, all things turn to him, and that's what Paul's referring to.

This whole passage has been about God's possession, God's ownership, that the church is God's field and it's God's temple, and that's in a triumphant note, he concludes this, all belongs to you,

and you all belong to God, and that's why the church that belongs to God should not boast in men. [52 : 31] Let me conclude with this from Romans 11, 33-36. The source of this church's life is God, the medium of the church's salvation is God, and the goal of church history, the reason for our existence is God.

So as we conclude year 2017 and usher in year 2018, let's remember not to boast in anything except for God and his Christ crucified.

Let's pray together. God, we thank you that you hold us in your grip and no one can snatch us out of your hand.

We belong to you. We thank you that you love us so zealously. Help us, Lord, to internalize that love and to live as those who belong to you, boasting in nothing else but you and your son, Jesus Christ, crucified.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Thank you.