

The Church and its Servant Leaders

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[0 : 00] So the reading this morning is from 1 Corinthians chapter 3 and verses 1 to the end and that will be found on page 1145 in the Pew Bibles. So 1 Corinthians chapter 3.

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit, but as people who are still worldly mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready, you are still worldly, for since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are fellow workers in God's service. You are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation, using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.

If it is burnt up, the builder will suffer loss, but yet will be saved, even though only as one is escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's spirit lives among you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person, for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become fools, so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness, and again, the Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.

So then, no more boasting about human leaders. 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 of Christ, and Christ is of God. Thanks be to the Lord.

Thanks, Jackie, for reading. Good morning, St. Silas. If you've not met, my name is Martin Ayres. I'm the lead pastor here, and we're going to look together at that chapter of 1 Corinthians. So it'd be great help to me if you could keep it open. It's page 1145 in the church Bibles. It's our regular diet as a church to work through the Bible, chapter by chapter, and just bring out what's there, so that we're letting God set the agenda. We're listening to his voice, and you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful as we look at this portion of God's Word. We prayed as it was read. Let me just pray again. Let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to it now. The scripture says, the unfolding of your words gives light. It gives understanding to the simple. So, Father, as we draw near to you now, we ask that you will open your Word to our hearts, and you'll open our ears and our heads and our hearts to your Word. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, do you want to be a grown-up is a question we could ask. And some of us might say, no, not really. We've made the word adult into a verb in recent times. Usually, we use the phrase adulting, and the word adulting. And when you think of what makes people say, I'm adulting, it's not very attractive things, is it? You know, you pay the gas bill, I'm adulting. You check the weather forecast before you go out, adulting. Being excited about a new washing machine, or even about the moment when you replace your dirty old dish sponge with a brand new one. And getting annoyed when they rearrange your local Tesco, and you can't find the things you normally get there. It doesn't sound very attractive, being an adult. Brew Dog have just opened the largest bar in the UK. It's just by Waterloo

Station. And it's clearly aimed at adults who don't want to be adults. There are slides you can go down between levels. There's a bowling alley.

[5 : 40] There's an ice cream van. But for all our talk about how being an adult is less fun than being a child, the truth is that most of us would still be quite offended to be told that we're immature.

We wouldn't want to hear that about ourselves. We all know that really it's good to be thought of as a grown-up. And we're looking at this letter written to a church in Corinth, who loved to think of themselves as mature. It was a gifted church. People were competent.

The Holy Spirit had given them gifts to use in serving Christ. And so because of those gifts, the Corinthian Christians thought they were very spiritual. But the truth is they were still enchanted by the things the world loves. Things like power and wisdom and impressive leadership.

And they brought that with them into church life. So they swooned over leaders that they thought would give them more spirituality, more wisdom, more power. That's what they wanted. So imagine how they must have felt when they were reading this letter out from the scroll when it arrived in Corinth, and they read verse 1. Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit, but as people who are still worldly, mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you are not ready for it yet. Indeed, you are still not ready. That, friends, is an absolute pasting from the Apostle Paul. He's basically saying, what I used to get told was it's time to act your age and not your shoe size. And that's what he's saying to them. I remember the days of weaning. For some of you, this is still your world. When we used to find, when you went looking for ice in the freezer, the ice cube trays were full of orange and green things. Frozen, mashed up sweet potato and courgettes and spinach, mashed up because the children couldn't cope with solid food. And then your life moves on.

And you go from that stage as an infant to that stage as a teenager when, which some of you are in now, where you open the fridge and you just eat from the fridge, don't you? You don't even need to sit down. You just eat what's there, standing with the fridge door open. You've come a long way.

[8 : 02] Well, the Corinthians think that in their spiritual development, they're grown-ups. They think that they're kind of postgraduate students in the Christian life. And that Paul is like a nursery teacher. You know, they've grown out of his teaching. They've moved way beyond it, that simple, foolish message of the cross. It gets you in, but how do you move on in the Christian life? That's the baby milk, but now we get steak and chips from our impressive Christian leaders. And Paul says in verse 3, he can see that they are still infants. Why? How can he see that? Because of the way that they divide over the leaders whom they follow. He says, verse 3, for since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere human beings? In other words, it's possible to be trusting Jesus, made right with God, but when it comes to how we think and how we live, we're still operating unspiritually, living as though we don't have the Holy Spirit, bringing our lives to life with the message of the cross from the scriptures. And any of us could fall into that error that the

Corinthians made, confusing giftedness with spiritual maturity. That's something that we could do in a church in a place like Glasgow, where many of you are highly skilled people. Many of you are good with people. Many of you are trained to be good listeners. There are people here who are excellent at music. There are people here who are very organized. But if we rest in our gifts, then we stay mere humans. And we don't appropriate the Holy Spirit in our lives to grow, to think as God would have us think, and to live as he'd have us live. If you think about the fruit of the Christian life, it's listed in Galatians 5, the fruit. And one of the fruits, well, it's one fruit, but there's different qualities listed. And one of them is gentleness. And some of you will have become Christians, and you're naturally already a gentle person. It's just natural to you. Or one of the fruit of the Spirit is kindness. And some of you will be kind people when you become a Christian, just because your upbringing and your social environment made you kind. What does it look like to grow, to add to your Christian life the qualities that would make you mature? Because the Holy Spirit is growing them in you and challenging you. And you're willing to work that out yourself, growing in the knowledge of God and self-control and courage and goodness and love for God's people.

Paul urges them to grow up. What about you? Are you resting in the natural or are you growing? Well, then, because the Corinthian immaturity was displayed in their division about leaders, the Apostle Paul then writes this brilliant chapter to help us think wisely with maturity about Christian

leadership, about church leadership. So we've got three points. Our first one is leaders are servants used by God. Leaders are servants used by God. And the big idea there is in verse 5. Just have a look. Verse 5. What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. Being a church leader is about being a servant.

[11 : 44] So we shouldn't be putting our church leaders on a pedestal. We should be recognizing that they're called to serve God. And when we see a church grow in measures like numbers, numbers who are coming, the danger is that if we don't think of them as servants of God, we attribute the growth to the leaders. And Paul shows us the foolishness of that thinking with this picture of church being like a farmer's field. So if you have a look at verse 6, he says, verse 6, I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but only God who makes things grow. It's a bit of a challenge, this image, because I grow vegetables in our garden. I've had a reasonably successful year. And I tend to expect credit from the family when we're eating the homegrown stuff. When in truth, it's not me, is it? We've got a grapevine up against the fence. Grapes have grown this year. They are really horrible. Because in Scotland, grapes are not going to grow well. It's the climate. It's not me. We've had courgettes and kale, reasonably successful. But it's not me, is it? I didn't get a seed and turn it into courgettes.

No, it's God. And the same goes for houseplant lovers in our church. Sorry, guys, those of you who are in there, there is a WhatsApp group out there for some of our most committed horticulturalists in the church who grow houseplants. And I'm told they show photos on there and they share their own joys and sorrows of propagation and nutrition and adventitious roots. But no one in the midst of all that could claim for themselves that it's really them making the plants grow. Verse 6, it is God who makes things grow. It's so helpful, isn't it, that we think of church like that. So it is when we think of the rescued people of God. People are at work all around us. We can point to people who maybe encouraged us in the Christian life. Only God can bring the growth. The Apostle Paul's ministry among that church was a planting the seed ministry because they'd not heard about Jesus until he brought that message. And it's important to see in this whole section, as we looked at growing in wisdom last week and as we look here at this week at Christian leadership, that it's governed by how Paul described his own ministry to them at the start of chapter 2. In verse 2 of chapter 2, if we just turn back, he said, if we start with verse 1, he didn't come with eloquence or human wisdom. In verse 3, he says he came to them in weakness, with great fear and trembling. He arrives in this pagan city of Corinth, this prosperous Roman city in weakness. But in verse 2, he tells them what he did.

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. That's the authentic Christian ministry that Paul has modeled. How on earth, if that was what Paul brought in such weakness, did anyone become a Christian? Well, that's exactly what we're meant to think, so that we know that only God could have done that by his Holy Spirit, bringing spiritual life. And then he says, Apollos watered the plants. That is that Apollos came to Corinth after Paul and he worked with that church in its infancy. He helped people begin to grow as disciples. But again, how foolish then, when Apollos moved on, to say, well, I follow him when he was just like someone standing with a watering can in the greenhouse. It's God who brings the growth. Now, where do we need to hear that today?

With the internet, any of us can access a whole swathe of Christian leaders anytime we want to and listen to their teaching. Maybe some of you know plenty of them yourself. Do we sometimes play a game of kind of mental super top trumps when it comes to Christian leaders, where we think, well, one leader is really good for, if you want, deeper spirituality. And then another leader, maybe we move to a new city and we choose a church with lots of people there because we think, well, that leader must be good because the church is big. They must have good management skills. And that's what I'll need, the church to be well organized.

[16 : 18] Or maybe they've got good charisma and that's what's grown the church. Well, when we hold leaders responsible for the growth of the church, it's not good for us. It's particularly not good for the leaders, is it? Do they start thinking of themselves as a big deal, as Barry Big Cheese, who grew the church all by themselves? Maybe there's something about me, they think, for all these people to be following me. So that in their ministries, it becomes their photo everywhere, their name everywhere, because they think they're the ones needed for growth. They've got to be at all the

services, doing all the talks so that people hear them. And in the last few years, what we've also seen in the wider church in the UK and America is that when we feel dependent on a church leader like that, we start overlooking faults in their character because we think, yeah, I know he's got a short temper, but you know, that's just Barry. That's just what he's like. It's just his culture. Wait till you hear his podcast. He's just so good. He's the one you want your friends to hear. So we overlook things that the New Testament says, don't overlook those things when you're looking for good leadership.

Paul says the rewards for him and his co-workers will come from God, and look at what they're based on in verse 8. He says the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. So God sees what they'll do. He sees how hard they'll work.

He'll reward. But then he says, for we are fellow workers in God's service. You are God's field, God's building. Is there a challenge here in how we think about other churches around us in Glasgow?

Maybe churches with a different denomination, or just churches where the foundation is still the cross of Jesus, but they just do things a bit differently. And we can think of them sometimes as competitors. Why is their church growing and ours isn't? Or why are we growing and they're not? Instead of remembering, verse 9, that leaders in Christ are fellow workers with one purpose, and it's God who brings the growth. It's all about bringing that same unchanging message of Christ crucified, planting with it, watering with it, and God will grow the church.

[18 : 50] And it means that lots of the judgments that we would naturally make about church leaders are based on the wrong things. If we picture the faithful local church minister working away in a church in a little town in Scotland where the church is small, and there doesn't seem to be much fruit, and people just walk past day by day, and they don't seem very interested. And then we picture a church leader on a big stage in a church of thousands of people in Texas that you can watch online. What judgments do we make about the abilities of those two pastors in those different places?

Paul says it's God's field. He raises people up to plants and to water, and any growth comes from him. I remember being at a church in my 20s where we had a pastor who would help me enormously to grow as a Christian, and a number of other people as well. We deeply appreciated his teaching from the scriptures. He plainly, prayerfully taught the Bible. He modeled the Christian life well, and then he announced that he was moving on to a different church after a few years. The strange thing was that it almost felt natural, well, it did. It felt quite natural to talk with one another and ask, do you think you'll leave this church when he leaves the church? Do you think you'll move on to a different church because he's gone? As though he had some irreplaceable human wisdom, and that's what we needed. And 1 Corinthians 3 says that is natural to think like that.

It's not spiritual. It's a merely human way to think. The spiritual response would be to think, well, thanks be to God that he has grown me through that person's ministry, and praying to God that what he would do next is provide new leaders who will preach Jesus Christ crucified from the scriptures, prayerfully dependent on the spirit, out of their weakness, so that God can continue to bring growth.

So that's our first point. Leaders are servants used by God. Secondly then, leaders are builders judged by God. Paul moves on into that picture at the end of verse 9 that we're God's building, and he carries on with it in verse 10. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. So a group of people can call themselves a church. Their leader can dress like a church leader, whatever we think that would look like. They can do all the kinds of activities a church would do, and if the foundation is not Jesus Christ, the message of the cross, that the power of God to save sinners is found in Jesus' sin-bearing death, if that's not the foundation, it's not a church. There's only one foundation for the church.

And we've got here this wonderful picture of the church, because he goes on to say that the materials that need to be used to build on that foundation are gold and silver and costly stones. Now why does he use those materials? That's not what you build a house with. It's because those are what were used to build the temple, gold and silver and costly stones. Solomon used them to build the temple of the living God, the place of God's presence in the world. And in verse 16, Paul

says, don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives among you? So a building like our building, it's a good rain shelter, but the temple is the rescued people of God wherever we gather, when we come together. And it's not conceivable for the Bible writers that someone would say, well, I'm a Christian, but I don't belong to a church, because it's when the people of God, rescued people of God, gather together, that they're the temple of the living God. The Spirit is in each believer, but when we come together, he's specially present. We ourselves are the temple. Now what does that mean for church leaders?

[23 : 12] Well, he says here, at the end of verse 10, each one should build with care. And in verse 12, God is looking at what church leaders are building with. Verse 12, if anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. So the judgment on anyone's ministry, their church ministry, is not from people, it's from God. He's the one who will judge it. It's not now, it's in the future, on a future day, the day, and looks can be deceiving. Things are going to have to be revealed on that day. So we get this awful picture of, I guess, a big building and fire sweeping it away because it's made of hay and straw.

And that's the picture of a congregation, and it might have looked very impressive. It might have looked like a successful church. Lots of plaudits, big media presence. And then on God's judgment day, he lifts the lid. He unveils what was going on spiritually all that time in that ministry. And he uses fire to burn up what won't last into eternity and leave behind the true work of growing authentic disciples of Jesus. And there's all this fire as the hay and the straw are burnt up. And when it's gone, there's nothing left. The leader might still be a Christian, but because they didn't center their message on the cross of Christ, people who came weren't hearing the gospel so they could come into the kingdom. And people who were already Christians didn't grow as disciples to the kind of maturity that gets described for us. Colossians chapter 1 describes the maturity of the Christian life in terms like growing in knowledge of God's will, growing in patient endurance, growing in thankfulness, growing in joy. Instead, in verse 15, he gives this picture.

If it is burned up, that is the work, the house, the builder will suffer loss, but yet will be saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames. So the leader, if they're still a Christian, they're saved for eternity. But it looks like a fire rescue operation, as the real value of what they were doing in their ministry is like a house that comes crashing down. It was worse than if they'd done nothing, because people went there who could have gone somewhere else and could have heard the gospel and come to faith and grown in their faith as disciples to make other disciples.

[26 : 01] And so at the end of verse 10, Paul said, each one should build with care. And I take it there will be surprises the other way on that day of judgment. Wonderful surprises.

We might think of a church today with low numbers, which the world has overlooked. And there's an amazing book about church ministry called *The Ordinary Pastor* by a man called Don Carson about his father's ministry in Canada, in a difficult place for the gospel, where he worked faithfully and persevered, and never preached to more than about 40 people, week by week, his whole ministry life.

But what if on the day that God reveals what's really going on in the church, we see a church today with low numbers, where the leaders were plugging away, loving God, loving the people, depending on Christ, preaching the message of the cross, and it didn't look like very much.

And on judgment day in the fire, what comes out is something incredibly beautiful, gold and silver, shimmering, blazing, jewels, because this is the transformed people made new in Christ.

And they have a beauty that Solomon's temple could only point to. As the Spirit was at work, growing God's people to maturity, and then he takes them to be with him forever.

[27 : 28] And it will be wonderful to see that labor vindicated by the Lord Jesus. And the wise builder will be rewarded in verse 14. So it's that day that will reveal the quality of the work.

And we can't judge it today. It's actually easy to draw in a crowd. You could spend 50 grand on the sound equipment, get some professional musicians in, give out free food every week, speak on issues that chime with the spirit of the age.

We could draw in a bigger crowd. It's just not how God builds a healthy church. The little church plant of 30 people, meeting in a primary school, sitting on those plastic school chairs, in the dining hall.

It might look weak today. Spiritually, it could be the temple of the living God, resplendent with gold and silver. God will judge it.

And then the Apostle Paul turns to the image of the church as God's temple. He turns it into a warning in verse 17. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

[28 : 39] For God's temple is sacred. And you together are that temple. Such is the value that God places on us as his people. He's watching to see that we are protected, nurtured, disciplined, that we grow in a healthy way.

So the first step for the Corinthians in growing up to maturity is to see the leaders as servants used by God. And the next step is to see the leaders as builders who will be judged by God.

And thirdly, he urges them to boast in the foolish message of the cross and not in their leaders. So our third point is boast in the cross, not in leaders.

He reminds them what he's taught them that we've seen in previous weeks about wisdom in verse 18, that they should embrace God's wisdom of the cross even though the world thinks it's foolish.

So look at verse 17. Sorry, verse 18. Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.

[29 : 46] In other words, if you build your life on the Spirit's wisdom of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the pattern for our life now with resurrection hope, the world will say you're a fool.

You've become a fool in the world's eyes. But if you want wisdom, become that fool and grow in the message of the cross. Build your life on it. And then the conclusion in verse 21.

So then, no more boasting about human leaders. And the answer is to see instead what we have in the cross from Jesus. He goes on. All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas.

They were defining themselves by tying themselves to one leader. I belong to him. Paul's saying they all belong to you. Do you see that? They're all yours because they're all servants from Jesus Christ to his people.

Used by God to show you Christ. And then Paul broadens it out to say, just look at what you have in Christ. Reflect on what you have in Christ. So going on in verse 21.

[30 : 52] All things are yours. The world or life or death or the present or the future. All are yours. And you are of Christ. And Christ is of God.

And one writer talking about these verses says that Paul picks everything that are the great tyrannies of human life. The things that we enslave ourselves to, either in fear or in longing.

If you think about the world, people around us are encouraged to live, to try and get whatever they can from the world. And in the old Willy Wonka movie, there was this song sung by a girl that said, I want the world.

I want the whole world. I want to lock it all up in my pocket. It's my bar of chocolate. That is the kind of the longing of everyone around us. We want the world, the whole world.

And it leaves us greedy and frustrated and discontent with what we have. And the risen Jesus Christ has been given the world by his Father, who said to him, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

[31 : 56] He's the King of everything. And he stands to inherit it, and he will share it with us. We want life. We want the good life. We want big experiences.

We want to know how we can get better quality of life. And then we find that when you come to Christ, we were made to know God in him. And so life to the full is having Jesus, being with him.

So life is ours with him. Then he talks about death, and we're afraid of death. It looms over us. It takes away people who are most precious to us, and then they're gone, and it's a horrible thing.

And Jesus has turned death into a waiting room. The poet George Herbert said, spare not death, do thy worst. You shall only make me better than before.

That's the Christian view of death. Then he mentions the present. And we live in an age obsessed with the present, don't we? I want it now. I don't care how.

[32 : 56] I want it now. That's why we borrow money, because we want things now. Well, we come to the cross, and we don't need to worry anymore that we might be missing out on the present, because presently, we have every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And through the church family, we enjoy the blessings in this world. And every day, we can wake up in the present and say, what sort of a day is it today in the morning?

What kind of a day is it today? Today is a really good day, because it's a new day, which means I'm a day closer to my glorious future, when I'll be given a resurrection body and will be united with

Jesus forever.

It's all ours in Christ. The future is ours, because we belong to him. And then Paul ends saying, we belong to him, and he belongs to God, where we truly belong.

So let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you that all things are ours in Christ.

[34 : 04] And we're sorry for the times when we forget that, and we yearn for what human leaders could give us. We pray, Heavenly Father, that you'd continue to provide us with faithful leaders you are pleased to use, that you would bring growth in our spiritual lives to maturity.

And we pray that you'll be at work among us as your temple, that what is done here would build on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ, that on the day you bring to light the work that is done here in this church, it will be revealed to be quality that lasts.

We thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for the wisdom of the cross, and pray that by your spirit, day by day, we would grow to maturity and become wise. For Jesus' name's sake.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.