

SESSION 3

A SERVANT'S HEART

Leader pages on pp. 140-143

THE POINT:
SERVE CHRIST WITH
ETERNITY IN MIND.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-15

MEMORY VERSE

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given.

⁶ **I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.**

⁷ So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

.....
⁹ For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to God's grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one is to be careful how he builds on it.

¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ.

.....
¹² If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw,

¹³ each one's work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work.

¹⁴ If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward.

¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will experience loss, but he himself will be saved — but only as through fire.

KEYWORDS

Planted...Watered (v. 6)– The phrase “church planting” is used in relation to starting new churches. It seems to have originated from this passage.

Foundation...Christ (v. 11)– Like the physical temple, New Testament people of God are being built up as the place where

the Spirit of Christ dwells, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and as the body of Christ (Eph. 2:19-22).

The Day (v. 13)– Most likely referring to the second coming of Christ. Jesus will judge the activities and efforts that were centered on Jesus and the gospel to be of value and eternal.

WHAT ARE OUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS SERVANTS OF GOD?

Imagine a movie director working with actors, producers, and crew members to create an epic movie. Each individual has a specific role, but they all contribute toward making the movie a success. However, what would happen if an actor began to take credit for the director's vision, or a producer tried to outshine the hard work of the crew? Each member of the team would be confused and upset if one person wanted all the glory for the successful film, in contrast to if each team member performed to benefit the greater storyline, simply fulfilling their role without seeking personal glory.

In the same way, followers of Christ are called to be humble servants, not seeking personal glory, but fulfilling God's plan for the benefit of His kingdom. Our world emphasizes personal achievement, fame, and recognition, but in God's Kingdom, we are to have a servant's heart.

Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3:5-15 that we are merely servants in God's grand storyline, where each has a role. Whether it's planting seeds, watering the seeds, or building an eternal foundation, we do our part with humility, knowing that it is God who gives the growth, and we serve with excellence to His glory.

Servants Don't Take Credit

// 1 Corinthians 3:5-8

Let's review. In our first study, Paul addressed how the believers were disrupting the fellowship of the church with their division over preferred leaders. In last week's study from 1 Corinthians 2, Paul stressed that the church needed to drop the worldly way of thinking and depend on the Holy Spirit for wisdom. Paul opened chapter 3 by chastising them for thinking like the world thinks, and he brought the issues of division and wisdom together. "For whenever someone says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not acting like mere humans?" (1 Cor. 3:4).

These men, to whom some were tempted to assign celebrity status, were nothing more than servants. It did not matter whether the task was grand and glorious or something quite lowly; the role of the servant was to carry out the task. In fact, the Greek word *diakonos* is tied to the idea of someone eagerly pursuing an assigned task, like a runner chasing the finish line. Paul and Apollos were not comparing their tasks or roles. Instead, their focus was on pursuing their task and carrying out the role the Lord had given to each of them.



THE POINT: SERVE CHRIST WITH ETERNITY IN MIND.

This principle applies to us today. Being a child of God also means being a servant of God. "Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to people" (Eph. 6:7). The danger arises when we compare our service to the service of others. Psychologists refer to the Social Comparison Theory, an idea that there is a drive within us to evaluate ourselves by comparing ourselves to others. For the record, self-evaluation is good, but Scripture calls us to examine ourselves to ensure we are walking with God as we should. The author of Lamentations said it this way: "Let's examine and probe our ways, and turn back to the LORD" (Lam. 3:40).

However, doing self-evaluation by comparing ourselves to others is faulty. Self-evaluation calls for us to consider our obedience to what God has called and equipped us to do. It is not, "Am I serving like Paul? Am I serving like Apollos?" Instead, we should ask, "Am I doing what God wants me to do?" Jesus often used agricultural metaphors, and Paul followed His example by comparing the church to a field. Even a city boy like me understands that there are different tasks to be done before the carrots are available for sale in the produce section. Seeds must be planted, and the plants must be sufficiently watered. These tasks are not independent of one another. They are interdependent. The planting comes to nothing if someone doesn't follow along and water, and there is nothing to water if someone doesn't first plant! It's the same in the ministry of the church. No task is more important than another, and no task or role stands alone.

Remember, we are in this together, but for what purpose? We are working together to build up God's church and advance His kingdom. Catch the emphasis: God's church. God's kingdom. Notice in this passage the emphasis is on God and His role. It is God who assigns our roles (1 Cor. 3:5); it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

There is diversity in our roles and ministries, but we are united for one purpose. "Now he who plants and he who waters are one." When we work together with a single focus and purpose, the fruit we produce is healthy. Your role, and mine, is to serve where God has placed us, with a servant's heart, willing to uplift the kingdom for God's greater plan.

HOW CAN COMPARISONS GET IN THE WAY OF US FULFILLING OUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS GOD'S SERVANTS?

Servants Work as the Master's Coworkers // 1 Corinthians 3:9-11

Paul continued his teaching that we all serve together, but he moved from the metaphor of planting a field to building a structure.



DIGGING DEEPER THE IMAGERY OF FIRE

Fire in the Bible is a powerful symbol of God's presence, purification, and judgment. The Hebrew word for fire *אֵשׁ* (*esh*),¹⁷ represents God's holiness and wrath. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, fire represented His Holy presence (Ex. 3:2). A pillar of fire led the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21-22), symbolizing God's guidance. In Genesis 18:24, burning sulfur (fire) destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah as judgment for their wickedness. The Greek word for fire *πῦρ* (*pur*)¹⁸ has the same meaning. In Acts 2:3, the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire to purify and empower believers. In Matthew 3:12, Jesus separates the righteous from the unrighteous, where the unrighteous faced judgment of "fire that never goes out." The Hebrew and Greek word highlights fire's role as a purifier and judge for all.

How can the imagery of fire as purification and judgment guide the way you live?



These pair well together, because both emphasize that the tasks we do are done in partnership with one another and in line with the will of God, “for we are God’s coworkers.”

Considering Paul’s emphasis that both he and Apollos are fellow servants and coworkers, it might seem as if Paul is elevating himself up above the others by saying, “I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder.” However, Paul was not making a comparison as though he were a skilled master builder, and Apollos was not. We should understand this verse in light of two key points.

First, keep in mind what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2 about the source of wisdom. Godly wisdom comes through the Holy Spirit. Paul was acknowledging that any skill or wisdom he had for building the church came through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we should note what Paul did with that skill and wisdom: he “laid a foundation.” God sent Paul to Corinth to share the gospel and plant the church. As the one who founded the church, Paul was responsible for laying the foundation for God’s church and witness in the city. The work of building the church was not his alone.

Building a church involves reaching, discipling, encouraging, and so forth, and is not the task of one person. Pastor search committees are too often on a quest to find a new pastor who can “really grow our church.” If you’re expecting your

pastor to singlehandedly grow your church, you are going to be highly disappointed. Your pastor’s role is not to do all the work of ministry; that responsibility is expected of the church for it to truly be the church. The pastor’s role, his calling, is to equip you to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). In other words, we are all in this together. I have a role, and you have a role in the building of the church.

As we build and do our part, we must ensure we are building carefully on the right foundation. The Bible is our blueprint, and the Bible clearly points to the foundation of the church: “That foundation is Jesus Christ.” There is no church without Jesus. Without His ministry, death, and resurrection as the center point of who we are and what we do, we are no different than any social club in your community. Sure, they may give us a sense of belonging and a drive to do good things, but the church is to be something wholly different.

Unfortunately, too many churches have lost sight of that. They may have started on the right foundation, building on the gospel of Christ, but over time, their emphasis was placed more on their programs. Or, church leaders were elevated more than the lordship of Christ. No church is immune from the damage that comes from forgetting the foundation. Even the wonderful church of Ephesus was later rebuked because they had “abandoned the love you had at first.

HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE WE’RE BUILDING ON THE RIGHT FOUNDATION AS WE SERVE IN THE CHURCH?

Servants Build on the Eternal Foundation // 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

What we build and the service we do matter. Paul listed six potential building materials: “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw.” If we were constructing a literal building, wood is a good, strong building material; gold and silver would not serve well. But in Paul’s analogy, gold, silver, and precious stones are the very things we want! When a building catches fire, it’s the wood, hay, and straw that are quickly consumed, but the precious metals remain. And that’s Paul’s point: build and do your

THE POINT: SERVE CHRIST WITH ETERNITY IN MIND.

work so that what you do remains. Let your service have eternal value — work that points to Christ, reflects His character, and makes a lasting spiritual impact.

There will come a day when Jesus returns, sets up His eternal kingdom, and we will stand before Him. At that unknown time in the future, our work will be examined. Paul later told the Corinthian believers, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Let’s be clear: this judgment has nothing to do with the believer’s salvation and security in Christ. Paul was writing to believers, and for all who have trusted Christ, He took that judgment and punishment on Himself on the cross. We will stand before Him as His saved children, and it is our actions and service for Him that will be examined. Serve Christ, and serve Him with a humble, servant’s heart. Serving Christ will not always be easy, but it will always be worth it. The joy we find in obedience now will pale in comparison to the reward He gives later.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT WHAT WE DO NOW MATTERS FOR ETERNITY?

DID YOU KNOW?

Rev. Lott Carey exemplifies a servant’s heart. Born enslaved in 1780 in Charles City County, Virginia, he gave his life fully to Christ and discipleship in 1807. By 1813, he had purchased his freedom, along with his two children, for at least \$850.¹⁹ In 1821, he became the first Baptist missionary from the United States to Africa. In Liberia, he dedicated himself to evangelism, education, and healthcare. He founded Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia and served faithfully until his passing in 1828.²⁰ His passion for Christ remains active today through the Lott Carey Foreign Mission, founded in 1897 by the African American Baptists. It is a global organization that supports fourteen ministries in eleven countries,²¹ through prayer, finance, and volunteers, uplifting lives with the transformative power of love.²² Carey’s legacy is testimony that goes beyond words; it is faith in action.

Biblical Truth: “Serve one another through love” (Gal. 5:13).

How does this servant’s heart strengthen your own witness?

LIVE IT

How will you live out your calling to serve Christ?

Serving Christ is having a servant’s heart in all areas of your life. It is a belief that faith will sustain you as you live for Him. Without faith, we cannot please God, as His coworkers. Prayer is an essential pathway to nurturing a servant’s heart that is not prideful and self-centered but is pliable to the tendencies of Christlike compassion. When we align ourselves with Christ, we seek His will and serve others with a humble heart and genuine love.

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- **Pray for Discernment.** Ask God to open your eyes to the needs around you that you may not see in your daily activities and reveal specific ways you can serve others.
- **Help Someone’s Burden.** Actively seek out the people God has revealed to you and offer your assistance. This could mean bringing cooked meals or running errands such as picking up prescriptions.
- **Serve Anonymously.** Find ways to help others without drawing attention to yourself. You could pay for someone’s groceries or toll, cutting their grass, or leaving an encouraging note.

DAILY READINGS

1. GOD BE PRAISED// PSALM 18:1-3

When superstars receive awards, they often have long lists of people to thank that include agents and production companies. Sometimes they write acceptance speeches, so they do not forget to thank an important person. Remember the victories won in your life and the ways God has delivered you. Recall how God has healed your body, stretched your finances, and answered your prayers? As you serve the Lord, do not forget that it is not your strength that keeps you, it is a faithful God. Let Psalm 18:1-3 serve as your acceptance speech and give God credit for all He has done in your life. Thank and invite God to continue to be your rock and salvation.

God alone is to be praised, He gets all the credit.

2. CHECK THE FOUNDATION// 1 CORINTHIANS 3:12

What have you been up to lately? What are you working on? In 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth and urging them to be united in their understanding and conviction. In chapter 3 verse 12, Paul wants them to understand that God is the foundation of everything. Is Christ the foundation you are working on? Are you depending on money or earthly resources more than God? If you are building your life, relationships, ministry or anything else outside of Christ, it will not last. So what do you do? Tear up the foundation and rebuild it on Christ.

Christ must be the foundation of all you do!

3. MAKE AN ETERNAL DIFFERENCE// MATTHEW 28:19-20

Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Beyonce is the most-award winning artist in Grammy history. Jeff Bezos is one of the wealthiest people in the world. While these achievements warrant celebration on earth, what do they mean for eternity? Before Jesus ascends to heaven, he commands his followers to go and make disciples of all nations.

Making disciples means more people will spend eternity in heaven. Teaching disciples to observe Christ's commands means that they will in turn make more disciples. While striving to do great things in your lifetime, remember Jesus's great command to make disciples.

Remember that only what you do for Christ will last.

4. PUT OTHERS FIRST// PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

It is generally agreed upon that children are self-centered. This attitude can be seen on the playground as kids make teams and everyone screams out "Pick me. Pick me." Teachers battle selfishness as children bicker over who gets to be first in the bathroom line. Regretfully, many adults are equally prideful and lack humility. We battle for positions and boast about our accomplishments. In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, he tells them to be humble and consider others first interests and see them as more important. What would our lives look like if everyone thought of others first? Think about your day tomorrow and identify ways that you can be humble in your interactions with others.

Be humble and consider others first.

5. THAT'S ABSURD// ECCLESIASTES 1:14;12:13

It has been said that insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. What would we call doing something even though we have been told by someone in authority that it just won't work? We could call that absurd. The writer of Ecclesiastes did the hard work for us and tried countless earthly pursuits to see what would make him happy and fulfilled. At the end of a long list of pursuits, called them all futile. He closes the Book of Ecclesiastes with the conclusion that we must fear God and keep His commandments. If we want to live humbly before the Lord, we must keep the most important things first. "If you love me, you will keep my commands" (John 14:15).

It is wise to fear the Lord and obey Him.