

Jason Upchurch - 1 Cor. 3:1-9 - How the Gospel Overcomes Conflict

So this morning we're going to see Paul returning to the original pressing issue in this letter which is the Corinthian church dividing over their favorite leader. The last chapter and a half has been something of a rabbit trail - an important rabbit trail - to the real issue that they are facing which is they are fighting over their favorite preacher.

Now, whether a church is fighting over their favorite preacher or fighting over the carpet color or fighting over anything juvenile, what we know from Scripture is that the real issue is an issue of the heart. It's greed or pride or lust or idolatry that comes from the heart.

Look over at **James 4:1-3** for a minute. This is an important verse for us as Christians to know and underline and keep in mind when we or anyone else is combative and fighting. Whether it's little kids fighting over a toy or adults fighting over...whatever. It goes back to issues of the heart.

Here, James just says the reason we fight is because we're not getting what we want. **Read 1-3**

This sounds super simple but at the end of the day this is what happens when we fight and quarrel. Our sinful passions are exploding within us and so we verbally murder each other. We want someone else's toy - their boat, their truck, their stuff, political power. We want their allegiance to our elder. And so we argue with people about it.

In Corinth what they wanted was their favorite preacher to be exalted. They wanted to be backing the right horse. You ever been around sports fans who are just sore losers? They can't just be happy that some other team won? That some other player or team is amazing and talented? That's Corinth with Paul and Apollos and Cephas.

But these truths here are what's going on in our hearts when we fight and quarrel. The spiritual reality is that we're murdering and coveting. And all the while if we just asked God with pure intentions, you know what? He might give us what we want.

But he won't give us what we want if we're just going to use it to sin all the more.

So any time there is tension or conflict, the question we can ask is: what do I want that I'm not getting? That'll tell you your heart.

That's what Paul is dealing with back in **1 Cor. 3**. What they want that they're not getting is their favorite leader to be exalted and recognized among everyone.

And so what he does is breaks down why that's wrong in **Vss. 1-4** and then the rest of the chapter are truths to correct this problem. It's not a list of dos and don'ts, it's a list of things we as believers need to remember when we think about our place - and everyone's place - in the Kingdom of God.

We'll only get through the first 9 verses this morning - talking about the problem and the first truth of the solution.

So what is the main problem then with exalting our favorite leaders?

1) The main problem is that it is acting according to the flesh, not the Spirit. **Read 1-4**

So if you remember from last week we saw that what sets the Christian apart from the world is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It's not that we're smarter or wiser or more clever or talented. It's the Spirit who opens our eyes to love Jesus and it's the Spirit who gives us understanding about the world around us.

But what we see happen in Corinth was that things were so bad that Paul could not even address them as though they were filled with the Spirit. They were people of the flesh.

Side: Something we're going to see throughout this letter is that - bad as these guys are, and sometimes they are disgusting - Paul remains very optimistic. And I think this is very pastoral and very gracious.

You remember last week I said that there are only 2 camps in the world: there's those with the Holy Spirit - Christians - and those without. Well, if he's addressing them as people of the flesh then aren't they unbelievers?

Paul's not willing to give up on them yet. So he sort of comes up with this middle road: he calls them babies in Christ. **Read 1-3a**

This is a pretty big rebuke actually because there would have been people in this church that had come to faith when Paul first preached in Corinth. But he's addressing the whole church and saying they're a bunch of babies. Their fighting and clamoring over preachers is evidence that they are so immature they are like nursing babies on milk. That's not a compliment.

This actually happens in the book of Hebrews as well. **Look** over at **Hebrews 5** for a minute. The author of Hebrews has been going on about how Jesus is the great high priest. He is greater than the OT high priest ever was because he was from a better order of priests. He wasn't a Levite, he was from the order of Melchizedek. And that's kind of complicated to explain - there's a lot going on with that. But then he stops and he kind of rebukes them in the same way Paul did. **Read 11-14**

Ouch. Same verbiage. They've become dull of hearing, they need milk, they can't even understand the difference between right and wrong.

See, in the Christian life there is an expectation of growth. There is an expectation of maturity. Just like a little baby starts with the basics and moves on, so too should believers start with the basics and continually grow in our understanding of the Bible and the will of God. We never get too smart for the basic gospel, but there is an expectation that we will get to a point where we understand it thoroughly to keep growing. Here's the basics:

Read 6:1-3

So as believers we should understand repentance, faith, know that the dietary laws and laws about washing hands are all behind us. We should understand the purpose of endorsing someone publicly through laying on of hands and resurrection and judgment. Those are pretty elementary things.

And then at the end, there's this flash of encouragement that God has to be in it, doesn't he. **Read 3**

We strive to mature, but God has to give the growth. The author of Hebrews is optimistic like Paul, but here's the deal: if there's *never* any growth, it might be because there was never any salvation. What comes next is one of the most severe warnings in Hebrews. The warning is not that someone can lose their salvation, it's that someone can understand these things and be involved in the life of a local church, but never actually be saved.

Read 4-9

So these are all things that unbelievers can take part in. They can be enlightened to the gospel message. They can taste the heavenly gift - that's either talking about taking communion or seeing the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit - it could go either way. They can be encouraged by the Bible, by preaching. But they can fall away. They can apostatize.

Then he gives us a little parable of 2 fields. Both fields are cultivated. Both fields are planted. And both fields receive rain. But only one field grows a crop. What do you do with the field that doesn't bear a crop but only bears thorns? You burn it down. That's the warning.

There is an expectation of maturity in the Christian life. Now, we can get all legalistic about this and start judging people about where they are or where we are. That's not really the point. The point is Christians should be growing.

And the author here has an optimistic flare like Paul does. **Read 9**

So there's that same kind of tension. "You guys should be teachers, but you still need milk. Watch yourself and grow. But I feel confident that you're saved."

And listen, I want encourage you guys and I think it's appropriate to warn as well: if the Spirit is in you there should be growth in your life. There should be growth in my life.

I go through seasons of discouragement and blah-ness. There are times where I don't want to read my Bible or pray. Maybe that's shocking to you, but it's something we all struggle with. Those are natural things. But they shouldn't be forever things. If you're in that season I'd encourage you to pray to the Lord to renew a desire for him and his word and just be in the Word.

I think that's a helpful admonition. Very encouraging and balanced. And that's the same kind of thing we see back in **1 Cor. 3**. **Turn** back there.

So when Christians fall into sinful behavior or patterns, it's as though we are going back to our natural ways. We are living life as though we are not in the Spirit.

I had the illustration last week of a tire on a car. It does no good if the tire is not inflated. When Christians start arguing over their favorite guy, it'd be like getting out of your car, deflating all your tires and then heading off for vacation. That doesn't make a lot of sense. It doesn't make a lot of sense to argue over our favorite leader, either. **Read 1**

Now, Paul says "I could not address you" - this seems to have been a perpetual problem with the Corinthian church. Lack of maturity.

But here's what's interesting: What is hindering their maturity is not intellectual capability, it's their sin. Their sin is keeping them from growing in Christ. **Read 2-4**

See, growing in the Lord isn't just getting more data or information. That's part of it. Peter tells us to grow in the grace and **knowledge** of the Lord Jesus Christ. So there is an information aspect to maturity.

But here it's the behavior of clamoring over their favorite leader that's keeping them from maturity. So Paul then turns to launch into a series of truths that we need to understand to keep ourselves from elevating our favorite leader.

2) Here's the first truth that we need to understand - and we'll just camp on this for the rest of our time: It's the Lord who assigns roles in the Kingdom. **Read 5-9**

So Paul's big point here is that it is the Lord who assigns roles. And Paul sketches out some pretty humble roles for him and Apollos. He says they are 1) servants, 2) farm workers, 3) nothings, 4) they are unified, 5) they are laborers, 6) fellow workers.

And let me just say, I think this is one of the most encouraging parts of this whole letter. Because I think it is our human nature to look at others and think they are more important than us.

Do you ever feel like what you're doing for the Kingdom doesn't matter? You look at some other person and you think they have it all together? Maybe you see some stay at home mom with a big platform or writing books and you're thinking "I can barely get all my kids a bath in a single week" what's her secret? Or you see some missionary serving in ways that make you feel like your wasting your life? Or some friend of yours just seems like they've got their act together and everything's gravy?

You know what we're doing in those moments? We're forgetting that God has different assignments for people in the Kingdom. Not everyone has the same role. When it comes to Paul and Apollos, he says what these jokers? They're servants.

Literally in the Greek they're diakonoi - deacons. They're waiters of tables, designed by God to serve his church. And he says this. **Read 5**

That word servants is the same word that is used of deacons elsewhere. He's not saying that they are officially deacons. What he's saying is that they are waiters. Even though they are apostles, what God has raised them up for is the most humble act of service to the church.

They're like a server who just keeps bringing out the gospel to people. And what Paul seems to notice is that the people who like him, came to faith under his preaching. And the people who like Apollos came to faith under Apollos's preaching. **Read 5**

So there were people in Corinth who had come to faith through Paul and others who came to faith through Apollos. And people usually gravitate to their spiritual mentor. So those who heard the gospel from Paul were wearing Paul t-shirts and those who heard from Apollos were wearing Apollos t-shirts.

And Paul says: that's ridiculous. You know why? Because who you come to faith through is all up to the Lord. The Lord assigned some people to come to faith through Paul. And the Lord assigned some people to come to faith through Apollos. It's not because Paul was better or Apollos was better. It's because God chose to use one over the other.

Can I tell you something? I have no idea how many people have come to faith under my ministry. And it used to bother me because I felt like that was some sort of spiritual benchmark of effectiveness. If I couldn't come up with some kind of number then I was failing. But do you know what the actual number is? All the ones the Lord has assigned. No more, no less. That doesn't mean I neglect the gospel - far from it. But it does mean I just do what God has called me to do.

See, here's the reality: I'm sure that some of you high schoolers who have worked at camp have led more people to Jesus than I have. And it's probably not even close. And that's okay. Because it's God who assigns who comes to faith through who. Should I be offering people the gospel? Of course. Should all of us? Of course. But at the end of the day, God's going to use some people more than others.

Paul then uses farming metaphors. Planting and watering. This job was the lowest job on the totem pole in Paul's day. These day laborers. **Read 5-6**

Usually day laborers were at the lowest end of society. We see them in Jesus's parables where people would just hang out all day in the gate waiting for a job. They had no formal education, they were muscle. There's nothing wrong with day-labor jobs, but not too many people aspire to day labor. "Daddy, I just want to be a day laborer." But that's what they were.

Paul planted the seeds of the gospel. He started the church. Apollos came later and watered - the idea is he nourished the church even more. More people would have come to faith while he was there. But despite their labors, who grew the church? God did.

Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, who preached in London in the 1800s was the son of a pastor and a grandson of a pastor. His mother taught him well and his grandfather taught him well. But it wasn't until he was 16 years old and wanting to visit a church across town that he came to faith in Jesus. In January of 1850 Spurgeon set out for a church across town, but there was a huge snowstorm in London and he couldn't make it to where he wanted to go. So he turned down a side street and entered into a Primitive Methodist Chapel.

There were only 12-15 people there and the man preaching was not the pastor. Spurgeon says, "At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went into the pulpit to preach. Now it is well that preachers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was: 'Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth.' He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text."

The preacher talked about how they weren't to look to themselves, or to college, or to their riches. They simply look to Jesus. And then the preacher stared directly at Spurgeon and said, "Young man, you look miserable...and you will always be miserable in life, and miserable in death, if you don't obey my text." Then he said "Young man, look to Jesus Christ, Look, look, look; you have nothing to do but look and live!"

Spurgeon says he has no idea what else the man said because right then and there he looked to Jesus and was saved. He believed.

He began preaching shortly after his conversion and several years later became the pastor of the largest baptist church in London and he had no formal training. You know who trained him? His mom and his dad. And his grandparents. And a cook he knew well.

I heard one person say that Spurgeon's family were piling on dry wood of theological truth for years and years. It just so happened that the Holy Spirit used a no-name preacher to light the match.

Maybe you're planting. Maybe you're watering. But any growth...any growth at all, is from God. Praise him that we get to be part of it at all.

See, we don't get to determine the effectiveness of our ministry in life. The Lord does that. The Bible says that the only thing that matters as a steward of the truths of God is that we are faithful with them.

Paul then says that he and Apollos are nobodys. **Read 7**

He repeats the line about God giving growth, but he highlights that he and Apollos - the great apostles of the New Testament church - are not anything. This is a two fold check on us. It's a check on how we view other people and it's also a check on how we view ourselves.

Your favorite preacher, your favorite author, your favorite ministry person, missionary, whoever. What does Paul say they are? Nothing. They're not anything. "Well, that's not very nice." Well, it might not seem very nice but it's true. They are human and sinful and in need of grace just like the rest of us.

And it puts a check on us putting too much importance on ourselves. A lot of times we either think too highly of ourselves - if I don't do this thing for God it will never get done - that's dangerous. Or we think too low - who am I to do this thing?

Paul says at the end of the day all of us are nothings. There's a saying that says "I'm just a nobody trying to point everybody to somebody." That's who we are. We nobodys just trying to point the world to Jesus.

Remember what John the Baptist said: He must increase and I must what? Decrease. We cannot exalt Jesus and ourselves at the same time. It doesn't work.

And as nobodys were united together as laborers. **Read 8**

Paul is one with Apollos and their both laborers. I was driving down the road here this week and about a mile down the road they had several tractors out prepping a field. They had one tractor spreading manure, another guy harrowing the field, and then a third one with a seed drill. And I'll be honest, there's something just mesmerizing about watching a field get cultivated. It's probably why I like mowing the lawn.

Anyway, imagine there was a crowd of people on the side of the road of 100 people. And they're all yelling at each other about who's doing the best job. "I like the manure guy, that's my guy!" "I like the harrow guys - look at how good he is at breaking up the ground, poo boy." And so on. Imagine the guys in the tractor get out and they hear people arguing over who's winning. How ridiculous would that be?

There's no winning. There's no teams. They're on the same side. Someone's got to spread to manure. Someone's got to break up the ground, someone has to plant. It's like Paul says: they are one. They're on the same team. And they are rewarded according to their labor - how they work.

That's how it is with us and that's how it is with our favorite leaders. We're not on different teams. Sprout and Piper and MacArthur and Carlson and Upchurch. We're all on the same team.

Or as Paul says, fellow workers. **Read 9**

See the heart of every leader is also the heart of every Christian: how do I serve the body of Christ? How do I help cultivate the field? How do I help build the building of the Christ?

And the biggest step - the first step, here - is just knowing that it's okay that everyone has a different role. We don't get to pick the role, but everyone's got one. So wherever God has placed you be faithful. Build up the body of Christ and you will receive wages for your work.

Pray