

1.4 Fire! Fire!

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bibles, and I hope you have a Bible with you, and you can turn with me to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians that is.

Josh Johnson's been looking at that with us the last few weeks, and we're going to read this morning in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 3 and verse 5, reading through to the end of the chapter.

This is a letter that Paul wrote midway through, I suppose, his early missionary journeys, probably about the middle 50s AD, to a church which he had planted, and which in many ways was a very thriving and gifted church, but also had many problems, and there was, I suppose the root of it was they had a very high and inflated opinion of themselves.

And the title that Josh has given to this little series is a church needing to be disempowered, perhaps to learn a few home truths about themselves.

So here we are at 1 Corinthians 3 and verse 5, and Paul says, what then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

[1 : 19] I planted, says Paul. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

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 take care how he builds upon it.

For no one can lay a foundation other than which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now, if anyone builds on that foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 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 has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

[2 : 37] If anyone's work is burned up, he'll suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. 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. For God's temple is holy, and you are God's temple. Let no one deceive himself.

If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool, that he might become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God, for it's written, he catches the wise in their craftiness.

And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, and they're futile. So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Kephass, or the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future.

All are yours. And you are Christ's. And Christ is God's. Amen.

- [3 : 53] May God bless us, his word. And we look forward to studying it. Good evening.
- Do open your Bibles again to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. What makes a good minister? What do they look like? How do they preach? What makes a good ministry? What are its hallmarks? Is a successful ministry a case of just producing a good sermon week after week after week?
- We can sometimes easily spot the ministry or minister that is a million miles from what we knew to be faithful and true. The ministry that is evidently and obviously all about the minister.
- Often it's in the name. Apostle Paul Ministries Incorporated. The kind of ministry that's more akin to a movie premiere, where the pastor is the Oscar nominated star, than a gathering to worship God Almighty.
- [5 : 00] Yet, there is a slightly uncomfortable reality in the church. Our leaders really do matter. They're to be respected, honored. But at the same time, too much of that can be a poison to their souls.
- And, if we're too attached to any one minister, it can be devastating to our souls, too. What if they fall?
- What if their ministry isn't quite what it ought to be? It is an anomalous thing for a church to flourish where the minister is way off beam. And so there's a slightly awkward question of how to think of ministers, how to relate with them.
- Added to that, the proof of a real ministry isn't seen in any one sermon. The fruit of a true ministry isn't harvested instantly.
- So what makes a good minister? What makes a good ministry? Well, these questions are not new questions. Paul answers things that are very similar as he tackles the Corinthian problem.
- [6 : 07] They love a powerful preacher. They're drawn to impressive leaders. They're divided over which leaders they belong to. Is it Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or Christ? And, of course, as we've been saying, Paul is last choice.
- The Corinthian preachers are eloquent. A big word in these opening chapters. Their preachers preach words of wisdom. Whereas Paul, well, he preaches the foolishness of the cross.
- We've seen that the Corinthians are worldly. Their desires and pattern are just like this world. But with sort of spiritualized language. And so it isn't a surprise that they treat their ministers in ways that are worldly.
- By the time we get to chapter three, the four groups that people follow, whose four names we've seen, they've shrunk to just two. Paul and Apollos.
- And I wonder if this is Paul now narrowing in on where the real problem is. Paul is weak looking. They've seen him tremble amongst them. His message is like foolishness. He's a tent maker.
- [7 : 16] Whereas Apollos, as we saw last week in Acts 18.24, was an eloquent preacher. Competent in the scriptures. Bold as a preacher.
- Yet even at that stage, something was deficient. Now, I'm not suggesting that Apollos was an imposter or a charlatan, but it isn't beyond possibility that a preacher with a natural gift for oratory could be a little unguarded and lacking in care.
- So that the gift shines bright, but the message is initiated. And in a city seemingly obsessed with pump, that would be a dangerous combination.

And one that over the long haul could begin to shift the focus away from all that is weak looking to the world, all that is weak by design, namely the exposition and embodiment of the cross of Christ, shifting it away from that and onto things that are a little bit more appealing to the world around.

Paul is unpicking all of this because it is a dangerous thing for a church to view their ministers wrongly or to view the wrong kinds of ministers in the right kind of way.

[8 : 31] And so he says, firstly, verses five to nine, ministry, the one job where a promotion puts you lower. The one job where a promotion puts you lower.

Ministry isn't a race to the top. The minister who's celebrated widely and fawned over is the minister who is receiving that which belongs to the Lord.

The best ministers are the ones who excel in serving their master. I heard recently of a family who decided to leave their church.

It wasn't this one. Because in the man's words, there was nowhere for his wife to progress to. She'd reached her ceiling. She couldn't climb any higher.

There was no promotion because the church wouldn't have women as elders. Whatever are the rights and wrongs of women and elders, that is to see things backwards.

[9 : 30] That is upside down. That is to apply the thinking of the world into the life of the church. Look at how Paul describes his and Apollos' role.

Two key things to note. Two ways to help the church hold leaders in the right perspective. The first one, verse five, preachers are servants. What then is Apollos?

What is Paul? Servants through whom he believed. How bizarre to honor servants. That is to get all mixed up. Look at the language in these verses.

Verse five, they are servants assigned by God. Verse six, it is God who produces the growth. Verse seven, God is the only one who is anything.

Verse eight and nine, Paul and Apollos are workers who will be rewarded by the one who commissioned them. They are God's workers working in God's field.

[10 : 27] God is the focus in these verses. He uses his servants to produce what he has planned, what he wants to see. If anyone's to be praised, it's God.

Paul and Apollos are doing his bidding. They're doing it his way and he is the one who ensures it will turn out the way it is meant to. In a church, being a preacher, being a leader of things is not about getting your own way.

It's not about status and rank. It's not a promotion. Those are worldly ways of thinking. God's church works differently. As we've been seeing, he has made foolish the wisdom of this world.

My office mate put it like this this week. It's the difference between get to and have to. The world sees leadership as something you get to have.

You get to do these things that come with it. But in the church, in God's design, it isn't some sort of privilege that's a reward for long service.

[11 : 36] It isn't a perk. You get to set the course now. You get to decide how things go. It's now over to you. It's now the Apostle Paul's shoe. Let's see what he can do.

No. In the church, a leader has to take responsibility for where things end up. And they're given serious responsibility. And they'll be held to account for it.

It isn't their shoe. It's God's. They serve him. They answer ultimately to him. So the more responsibility one has in ministry, the lower one goes.

Leading is serving. It isn't a case of, can I rise any higher, but can I go any lower? It's not to get your way, but it's instead to put those under your care, above yourself, doing what is best for them, whether they like it or not.

And very often, it means putting up with all kinds of backlash. Christian leadership, Christian ministry is service. It means that you're last. It means climbing up on a cross of your own.

[12 : 48] That's why our apprenticeship program here at the church has practical service that's done behind the scenes as one of its key elements. Setting up chairs, cleaning toilets, that isn't pragmatic.

That's not a case of, these things need to be done, so we're just going to make the apprentices do it. No, if serving God and his people isn't gladly done in menial things, in training, then it won't be driving someone's work when more responsibility comes their way.

Ministers are servants and they need to be viewed rightly as that. But secondly, Paul does point out that they are appointed by God.

They're appointed by God. As well as being servants, Paul makes clear that preachers are given to us by God himself. So there's a right sense of honor in that. Notice verse five.

They are servants, but they're servants through whom you believed. No small thing. Yes, in comparison to God's and all that he's doing and has done, they aren't anything, verse seven.

[13 : 56] But they're still God's workers. They're still doing what God wants them to do. They're still those who have planted and those who have watered. Of course, it's very easy for us to accept or to claim God's special anointing, his blessing, his appointing of leaders that we like.

But it's a different thing altogether to accept the same for those who aren't quite to our liking. That sort of fickleness is never beyond the church, is it? And that's what we see in Corinth.

Apollos, well, he's to the liking of the Corinthians, but Paul isn't. Apollos looks powerful, he looks wise, Paul doesn't. Thus, Apollos is worthy of honor, and Paul isn't.

That's an easy thing to do, isn't it? I can get on board with this person's style of ministry, so they ought to be honored as a Lord's special servant, but I can't get on board with that person.

They make me a bit uncomfortable. Their ministry will confront my world and my friend's world with the hard truths of the gospel, with a conflict that this world and God's kingdom can't be bedfellows.

[15 : 09] But notice, Paul doesn't say, follow me, instead of Apollos. He doesn't call into question Apollos' credentials.

No, he says, we were both appointed by God himself. Both appointed to help bring about the miraculous fruit of faith in the lives of the Corinthians. Apollos isn't a heretic.

The problem is that Paul's vital ministry was being sidelined and written off because of a preference for something that looked a little bit more mighty. Well, it's become altogether too easy these days to part company with a church and go somewhere else if we don't like the ministry that's going on.

I'm not talking even about leaving over serious doctrinal problems. Sometimes that is right. but leaving over not even secondary things but third or fourth order things.

It's just that the style of ministry isn't quite to our taste. But it's always possible that what we find uncomfortable is the very thing that God will use for our group.

[16 : 21] The Corinthians are God's field, his building, and it is he who has sent his workers to tend to his precious building. He decides who they are.

The Corinthians don't get to. Now, Paul's point here is that whether it is he or Apollos or whoever it is that preaches to the Corinthians, preachers are God's servants.

So imagine going to Buckingham Palace to meet the queen and coming away and someone asks, what was it like? What was it like to be in the palace and meet the queen? Well, let me tell you, it's the aura.

You expect some sense of awe, but wow, the aura that the butler had was just incredible. I truly met the most wonderful butler. They get to work in the most magical building with the most important people.

It's absurd. You wouldn't come away thinking that. When you get to meet the queen herself, you wouldn't end up talking about the butler.

[17 : 28] Well, just as absurd is sidelining a true ministry that is patterned after the cross because we find another one that is a bit more to our liking. Well, Paul says in verse 8 here that God's workmen will receive wages according to their labor and that's what he goes on to develop in verses 10 to 17.

He says, secondly, all ministry will be tested in the end. All ministry will be tested in the end, verses 10 to 17. It really does matter how ministry is carried out because it is building on Christ himself.

Look at verse 10. Paul has moved on from the gardener farmer image. The image is now preachers as builders and church as a building. Paul says, he laid a foundation.

But notice in verse 10 that it's no longer a Paulus who is in view alongside Paul. He simply says, someone else is building upon his foundation.

I take it that Paul is now aiming at the local leaders in Corinth. The Corinthians likely know exactly who Paul is talking about because there is now a warning as to how to build on the foundation that he laid.

[18 : 52] Let each one take care how he builds on what Paul started. But it's also worth noticing here how Paul describes himself.

Skilled master builder. I don't think that's Paul blowing his own trumpet with his description. He does need to defend himself and his ministry but why does he use that phrase?

It sounds quite grand. It might play into the Corinthians love of things. A skilled master builder. But I don't think that's the reason. I think Paul uses that phrase to bring to mind Isaiah chapter 3.

It's the only other place in the Bible where you find the phrase. Some translations have it as skilled magician in Isaiah and some have it as skilled craftsman. When Paul quotes from the Old Testament in his writings he's usually quoting from the Greek version of it.

And that version reads just the same here in 1 Corinthians 3.10 as in Isaiah 3.3. If anyone's using the NIV this evening they'll be able to see that.

[20 : 00] And so at the end of Isaiah chapter 2 we read stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath for of what account is he?

Stop putting trust in man. And then God's response at the start of Isaiah chapter 3 is to say that he's going to take away their support. He'll remove what they trust in including the skilled master builder and the expert in charms or if someone's got the King James version the eloquent orator.

And then he says in Isaiah 3.4 And I will make boys their princes and infants shall rule over them. Do you see what Paul is doing here?

This isn't just an incidental description of his own role. No, he's aiming at a stinging rebuke towards those who followed him. I will make boys their princes and infants shall rule over them.

The very word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 3 chapter 1 about the Corinthians. Infants. Paul is warning them that how ministry happens matters.

[21 : 12] Paul has laid a foundation. Do you see how important this foundation is? He mentions it four times. Verse 10 he's laid it. Verse 11 no one can lay a different foundation to the one Paul has laid.

Verse 12 what is built on the foundation will be tested. And then verse 14 again foundation. Any good building needs a proper foundation.

A building on a dodgy foundation is not going to do well. But the foundation that Paul has laid is flawless because verse 11 the foundation is Jesus Christ.

Paul says take care how you build on his finished flawless work. A ministry built on personality on eloquence on wisdom might and honor as this world knows them is a ministry that will be exposed.

Putting confidence in a ministry like this is akin to what we saw in Isaiah. Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath. And such a ministry may well lead to God giving his people the leaders they deserve.

[22 : 27] Infants. Paul says that a light is going to be shone on the work that is done for the Lord. The ministry of any church is going to be put under a microscope.

And Paul's focus here isn't on what the task is but rather how it's done. The task is building the church. That is set but how the building happens is the concern.

So verse 13 a day is coming when all will be revealed. It will become manifest. The day will disclose it. It will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

And there are three possibilities of what the fire will reveal. First reward. If the work survives the fire verse 14 then he will receive a reward.

There is a way to build. There is a way to minister that is in sync with Christ. That lays on top of Christ's foundation something that will last. A way to build that matches the foundation.

[23 : 41] A way to build which is in keeping with Christ at every turn. A way to build that is building with quality. A quality that isn't of the world's standards but of Christ's.

There is a way for us to do ministry that exalts all that Christ has done and so bears a fruit that will last. A ministry that doesn't meander with the fads of the day.

A type of ministry that isn't focused on big shoes and displays here and now. A ministry that matches the gospel that matches the saviour. Ministry is cross shaped work whether that's preaching for a church or teaching a Sunday school for the little ones.

It doesn't look glorious to the world. It involves a great deal of sacrifice and at times shame. And if looked at with only the eyes of this world it will look as unpromising as a man hanging on a cross.

But it will produce something that can verse 14 survive even the fire. There is a way to minister that produces real fruit lasting fruit.

[25 : 00] But think about the image Paul has already used. He planted Apollos watered and God gave the growth. There's no shortcut.

There's no cheat to growing vines on the branch. It's not quick work. It's not instant work. Listen to what David Jackman says, a friend of our congregation.

He says, one of the greatest implications for preaching is the reminder that growth is a gradual process which is hardly observable on a day-to-day basis. We can tend the plants but we cannot make them grow.

We can hoe the soil, remove the stones, deal with the weeds, but we do not produce the fruit. It has been rightly said that when God ripens apples, he isn't in a hurry and he doesn't make a noise.

So the preacher is in for a long haul but confident that the seed has all the power needed to germinate and supply. a ministry like that will produce a reward.

[26 : 06] The reward here isn't salvation. We can see that here clearly from the context as well as it not matching the teaching of the Bible. We'll see shortly that there's a way to minister that won't be rewarded but doesn't remove salvation.

And so it is hard for us to be specific about what the reward exactly is. But we can be sure that that is what Paul is saying. At the last day some who are raised to glory will receive more glory on top of that.

We don't have time to dwell on that now but let me recommend a book if that's something you'd be interested in that helps with questions around these rewards this idea of rewards.

It's called A Christian's Pocket Guide to Good Works and Rewards by Mark Jones. A helpful little primer on these things. So that's the first thing that the fire might reveal.

Reward for a lasting ministry. But verse 15 there's a second possibility. Rescue just.

[27 : 18] Rescue just. If anyone's work is burnt up he will suffer loss. though he himself will be saved but only as through fire.

There is a way to build that is shoddy. When under pressure, when faced with a huge task and a lot of hard work, it can be incredibly tempting to find or use shortcuts, loopholes, and to begin overlooking or allowing and even participating in sketchy or questionable ministry practices.

you can get away with them. But Paul says here that in the end they will be shone up and ultimately you won't get away with it.

It's not unheard of, is it? Someone incredibly gifted has alliances made for them. As character flaws begin to appear, maybe as the odd accusation is made, they're met with some qualification about the fruit that's being produced, the powerful ministry, and that these flaws just accompany someone who's just so gifted and unique.

Or maybe the shoddiness is just participating in ministry with a kind of half-hearted commitment, never showing up on time, not taking preparation seriously, not building with the best materials, no need for the gold, the hay will do.

[28 : 46] Thinking that just showing up is what counts. having an attitude that doesn't echo Christ's pattern in the cross, where sacrifice is too much, and where results and acclaim are sought quickly and often.

When I did Cornhill, one of the lecturers, Andy Gamble, used to say, it is very easy to assume that in teaching a passage, in preaching to people, that we'll assume we'll want to exalt the Lord Jesus, but the temptation will always be there to have people exalt you.

There is a way to serve and do ministry that won't necessarily remove us from the kingdom, but when confronted with fire, all that we will have done, all that we will have poured our lives into will be burnt up, and our life service will have been shown to produce no lasting fruit.

What a way to enter eternity, being pulled out of a burning building, as everything we've spent our lives doing crashes down around us, arriving, but only just by the skin of our teeth.

That's a very solemn word to any minister, but it's not just a word to preachers. It isn't just important that we serve Christ, how we serve him matters.

[30 : 16] Well, there's a third option. Ruin. The fire may lead to ruin. Verses 16 and 17, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

I think this may be the warning aimed at someone else mentioned in verse 10. The language used by Paul is very intentional language here. we see finally in verses 16 to 17 mentions of the temple.

And the other significant place in the Bible that brings together gold, precious stones, wood, and these kinds of things is Solomon's temple. And here, verse 16, Paul says, do you not know that you are God's temple?

They are that because Paul has built correctly. But the reason that ministry needs great care, the reason it needs to be done in the right way is because God isn't just building any old building. His church is his temple.

His church is where his spirit dwells. It's not a place for half-heartedness. It's not a place to take advantage of his precious people for our own ends.

[31 : 31] There is a way to minister that quells the cross of Christ in the lives of people. There is a way to minister that unwraps the empty hands of faith from Christ's finished work on the cross and leads people to clench those hands somewhere else.

A way to minister that rejoices in all kinds of other things than that which brought an end to our sin. Than the place that our sin was kneeled to and dealt with.

There is a way to minister that communicates for people that the cross is fine, it's okay, but here is something to get even more excited about. Something that will take you to the next level.

The Corinthians like the sound of that. But that is the road to ruin. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

Paul finishes this chapter by telling the Corinthians that they actually want less than they have.

[32 : 46] Verses 18 to 23, they want less than they have. All that belongs to God has been given to all of God's people. We don't have to choose.

Paul finished by saying, don't be deceived, verse 18, don't fall for the thinking of this world. Be a fool. Be a fool in the world's eyes that you might be truly wise.

Because the opposite is only going to lead to disaster. Stop all of this pettiness. Stop clinging to your favorite preacher. Stop weighing things the way that the world does.

Don't be ashamed of a preacher who doesn't cut it in the world's eyes. And don't put your trust in one who is too clever with their words. It's a dangerous thing to be left eating out of the palm of a preacher's hand.

What counts is the fruit a ministry produces. Any ministry is building on Christ, is building on his foundation. What counts is the fruit ministry produces, a fruit that is being built on Christ, that is being built in the likeness of Christ.

[34 : 04] It is then that it's a true ministry. Then it will be revealed to be of the finest quality. God will show things for what they are. Those who think themselves wise will be caught out in their craftiness.

Verse 19 Those who think themselves wise in this world are chasing after the wind. It's futile. Verse 21 don't boast in men.

The reason that that is so important is because we might not know until the last day what the true character of our ministry was. God will reveal it. They won't get away with it.

but it is possible to carry off the appearance of a genuine ministry for a long time to be heralded in appropriate ways by all the right kinds of people and we might not know in our lifetime the absolute quality of that ministry but what we can be sure of is that through Christ we have been given all that we need.

We have indeed been given all things verse 21. All things are ours. It's like how he introduced the letter in chapter 1. All things are ours if we put our trust in Christ.

[35 : 23] He will never let us down. He won't be found out. And as we put our trust in the right place as Christ is our delight we don't need to choose because all the true gospel workers are ours because they're God's servants.

all things are ours whether it be Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future. All are ours as we are Christ's.

We don't need to be competitive about ministries. All true and good ministries are given by God for his people. So what makes a good ministry?

It is one whose foundation is Christ in all things. It is one that is built in cross shaped ways. It is one that is concerned with fruit that lasts.

It is one that is undeterred from its task by the wind of the world. a good ministry, a fruitful church proclaims Christ, is patterned after Christ, perseveres with Christ no matter the cost and produces real faith in Christ.

[36 : 45] That's a good ministry. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, where you give us preachers who don't play to our itching ears, help us to hear.

Where we need to be challenged, challenge us. And be at work in us as a church that we would truly be engaged in a ministry that will last into eternity no matter the cost.

for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.