

1 Corinthians 3:5-11
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2026

There is an old joke, goes something like this: a man working in an office building looks out his window to the street below and sees a crew of workers from the city, two guys working along the side of a street. The man is perplexed because what he sees is one worker digging a hole, bother of them waiting a minute then the next guy filling the hole back in. They move up the street about ten feet and do the same thing. And it goes like this over and over. The man in the office building needs some answers so he heads down to the street to ask about it. He approaches the workers and says, “Hey, fellas, I’ve been watching you for a little while from up in my office and I’m confused. I see one of you dig a hole, you both wait a minute, and then the other one fills it back in. Why are you doing this?” The first worker replies, “We’re a three-man tree-planting team from the city parks department. One of us digs the hole, one puts the tree in, one fills it back up. But the guy who plants the trees is out sick today.”

Not a great joke. Maybe it was invented to poke fun at the inefficiency of government agencies or something, I’m not really sure. But I think it might drive home for us an unintended point. When one person doesn’t do the job they’ve been given, it makes someone else’s job meaningless. Maybe even to the point that it becomes ridiculous. How silly it becomes to dig a hole and fill it back in when no one is there to put in a tree.

It’s not so different from the church that God plants. Instead of planting trees, God grows believers, he brings them together, his people increase. And ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, ever since he gave the great commission to his disciples, saying, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” God has handed over that work to people. To the twelve apostles and to all believer and to you and me. That is the way he has chosen to grow his church in this world, by giving his gospel message to us and then sending us to proclaim it so that the word planted in peoples’ hearts might cause faith to grow and cause God’s kingdom to grow. And if you think that we can do this without everyone working together, well, that’s ridiculous.

This is the point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. This is what he wants his readers to understand. Because his readers had the idea that their status came not from their relationship with God but from their relationship with God’s gospel ministers. Or rather, from the right Gospel minister. In the first chapter of this letter, we hear Paul admonishing them because they were so focused on the gospel minister they followed that they lost sight of what really mattered. He writes, **My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”** Quarrels and divisions tore at the fabric of unity that belongs to the

Christian congregation. They were so intent on clinging to their favorite pastor that they forgot what the pastor was really there to do.

So, Paul comes back to this point here in our text: **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.** The person of Paul or Apollos or Cephas is really nothing. The work of Paul or Apollos or Cephas is what matters. The work they did was the work of preaching the gospel message. That was the task assigned to them and it was assigned to them from God. But the thing to keep in mind, that Paul wants his readers to keep in mind, is that this task of preaching the gospel is carried out in different ways at different times. That’s why Paul goes on to write, **I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.**

And that sentence assures us of two things and keeps away from us two sinful thoughts. The first sinful thought is that the growth of God’s church is dependent on me. Or to put it another way, the Christian church will fail. It won’t grow if I don’t do a good enough job. Either way, by thinking this we are taking out of God’s hands the miracle of conversion and we’re putting it into our own hands. We are saying, “God is good and he’ll do his work but he can’t do it if I don’t do my part.” And while it may not be our intent, we are setting ourselves up in the place of God to be the ones upon whom everything rests.

Which erodes our trust in the Gospel as the means by which God creates believers. We see the Gospel as secondary to everything else we do as a church. We begin to set aside the gospel in favor of building personal relationships, in favor of programs that will entertain, in favor of learning how to be warm and welcoming and charming to those seeking a church. We set aside the gospel in favor of sage advice on how to live or how to improve our lives. We set aside the gospel in favor of interesting topics, in favor of a worldly cause, in favor of good rhetoric. Now, I’m not saying that we’re all guilty of all of those all the time, but all of us do have that temptation—to grow the church with something other than the unconditional love of Christ that moved him to die for sinners. We get distracted. We become like those Corinthians who set aside the gospel in favor of the minister they really liked.

And when that happens, we become vulnerable. You see, Satan can never attack the gospel. He can’t attack a church by trying to destroy the work of Christ. It can’t be done, that gospel is sure, it stands firm, it is invincible. But he can attack the things that surround the gospel. If a church is founded on being warm and welcoming, Satan can destroy it like that by inserting sinful thoughts and sinful words, gossip and slander that work their way through the whole congregation until the warmth is gone. If the church is founded on sage advice, Satan can find a way to insert a sinful desire masquerading as sage advice that will only tear one away from God. If a congregation is built on making people feel good about their lives, what happens when Satan brings something painful or anxiety-inducing? It all comes crashing

down. If a church is founded on a worldly cause, Satan can frustrate that cause and lead the church to believe it has become purposeless.

So, we preach the gospel. Every day, at every opportunity, with little to no regard about how that gospel is received. Kind of like a farmer sowing seed in a field. He threw it everywhere and he trusted that the seed would grow. And it did. So, let us sow the seed, let us preach the gospel, let us water it and trust that God will cause it to grow, as he always has. Let us tell others that Jesus Christ has lived and died and has risen again to assure them that their sins cannot condemn them, that heaven has been won for them. When we preach the gospel, people are saved. And when we preach that gospel, people become filled with joy that makes them warm and welcoming. It creates a desire to build personal relationships, it motivates to improve our own lives and the lives of others, it becomes interesting and entertaining because we long to hear over and over again about what God has done. God causes the church to grow by the gospel and causes it to grow in love and service by the gospel.

So, we come back to that phrase that Paul writes, **I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.** God has been making it grow. But don't forget, God has given us work to do as he makes his church grow. So, Paul talks about one who plants and one who waters. It's the same gospel ministry but carried out with different goals and in different ways. This saves us from the second kind of wrong thinking we might be tempted to have. We look at someone's work, their gifts, they way they carry out their tasks and it can be easy for us to say, "That's not me. I don't have a job, I'm not involved." Brothers and sisters, nothing could be further from the truth.

Because remember, first and foremost, you are a part of this Church—with a capital C. You are a redeemed and forgiven and loved child of God and he has called you to serve, to use your own personal gifts in a way that brings people to Christ, brings them to the gospel. Maybe you're the one digging the hole, maybe you're the one putting the tree in, maybe you're the one filling the hole back up but you're needed. Think about how pointless those two jobs are without someone doing the third. Maybe you're the one who plants, maybe you're the one who waters but both are needed. One is pointless without the other.

So, find joy in the work you do for the Lord because it's a privilege that comes from being rescued and redeemed by him. Never let Satan plant in your mind that you have no place, no part in the body of Christ or that you do not share in the ministry of proclaiming the gospel. You have the love of Christ and you share it, with your words, with your service, with your care and concern for others, with your eagerness to make things on this campus look nice or run smoothly or encourage others to be involved. God provides what is needed for the church to succeed and what he provides is you and he brings success by causing the church to grow when you share the gospel or when you make it so that others can share the gospel.

I'm going to shift my analogy for a second, because that's what Paul does. Paul's encouragement at the end of our text is this: **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.** Think about the church as you would a building. There are a lot of different jobs, a lot of different types of work that go into creating it. You need electricians and plumbers and carpenters. There's mason work and finishes and flooring and roofs. But rather than think of yourself as one of the workers putting things together, think of yourself as a brick or a two-by-four or a wire or a floor tile or a lighting fixture. You are the building, you are a different part that depends on all the others, a part upon which all the others depend. By the grace God has given you, that is what you are. And you rest on the foundation of Christ, his love and forgiveness—the gospel. And it lasts to eternity which means you last to eternity as a member of his beloved Church. Amen.