Introduction and Contextual Review

Over the last three lessons we stayed in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4. Paul could not speak to the Corinthians as to spiritual men. He had to speak to them as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. They were brethren, and they were in Christ, so their standing was never in question. Their thinking was the problem. They were examining the things of God by the measure of man, and the evidence was plain: "For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men?" (3:3-4).

We previously set the whole of 2:6-3:4 beside three systems and found that the text needs none of their additions. A believer who measures God's word by man's standard is fleshly, and the remedy is proper thinking and growth, from milk to solid food.

The proof of fleshly thinking at Corinth was the ranking of teachers. So Paul now takes up the teachers themselves. If the church is going to line up behind Paul or behind Apollos, it needs to know what Paul and Apollos actually are.

> What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. (1 Corinthians 3:5-10)

The paragraph uses two pictures. The first is a field with a man who plants, a man who waters, and God who gives the growth. The second is a building with a master builder who lays the foundation and others who build on it. Both pictures make the same point. The servants do the work, but the field and the building belong to God. The building picture also leads into the next paragraph, where the work built on the foundation is tested (3:11-15). That is next week's lesson. This lesson stops at the caution that closes verse 10.

Exposition

Verse 5: "What Then Is Apollos? And What Is Paul?"

The word "then" is οὖν (oun). It draws an obvious conclusion from what was stated previously. The Corinthians had been saying "I am of Paul" and "I am of Apollos." Very well, Paul says, then let us ask what these men are.

Notice that the question is "what," not "who." The pronoun is τί (ti), the neuter form. Paul does not ask about their personalities, their gifts, or their reputations. He asks what kind of thing they are, what function they fill. The answer comes in one word, and it is not a picture of superiority.

The order of the names is also worth noting. In verse 4, Paul came first. Here Apollos comes first. Paul does not put himself at the head of the line.

"Servants Through Whom You Believed"

The word is διάκονος (diakonos), a servant. In ordinary Greek, it was used for the man who waited on tables and carried out what he was told. It is not a title of rank. It describes someone who works under another and for another. Paul will say the same thing in different words in the next chapter: "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (4:1). He says it again to this same church in his second letter: "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

"Through whom" is δι' ὧν (di' hōn), the preposition of means. The servants were the channel. They were not the source. The Corinthians did not believe in Paul or in Apollos. They believed through them. Romans 10 describes how that works: "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent?" And then, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:14-15, 17). The preacher carries the word. The word is what is believed.

The verb "you believed" is in the aorist tense. It points back to the time they first believed. That brings up the history in Acts. Paul came to Corinth from Athens and stayed: "And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11). During that time "Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized" (Acts 18:8).

"Even as the Lord Gave Opportunity to Each One"

The Greek reads more simply than the English: "and to each as the Lord gave." The word "opportunity" is in italics in the NASB because the translators supplied it. The Greek does not say what the Lord gave. It only says that whatever each servant had, the Lord gave it. That could be the opening to minister, the gift to minister, or the assignment itself. "Opportunity" is one fair way to fill the gap, but it narrows what Paul left open. The point does not depend on the "what." Each servant had what the Lord gave him.

Paul uses the same language in Romans: "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith" (Romans 12:3). He will press the point in the next chapter: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (4:7). A servant cannot be proud of an assignment he did not give himself.

Verse 6: "I Planted, Apollos Watered, but God Was Causing the Growth"

Now the picture of the field. Paul planted. He came first and preached the gospel where it had not been preached. Apollos watered. He came later and built up those who already believed. Acts records his arrival: "And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:27-28). Corinth was the chief city of Achaia. The order in activity is important to consider. Apollos "helped those who had believed." He watered what was already planted.

The verb for watering is ποτίζω (potizō). It's the same verb used in 3:2: "I gave you milk to drink." Two verses ago the servant was feeding an infant. Now he is watering a field. In both pictures he supplies what is needed, and someone else is credited with causing the growth.

The tenses tell the story. "Planted" and "watered" are aorist. Each man did his work, and it was done. "Was causing the growth" is the imperfect form of αὐξάνω (auxanō). The imperfect describes ongoing action in the past. While Paul was planting, God was causing the growth. While Apollos was watering, God was causing the growth. After both men left Corinth, God was still causing the growth. The servants came and went. The growth went on, and it was God's work the whole time.

Paul says the same about the whole body in Colossians. The body that holds fast to the head "grows with a growth which is from God" (Colossians 2:19). He also told the Thessalonians how it works: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). God causes the growth through His word. The servant does not add power to it. He delivers it.

Verse 7: "Neither the One Who Plants nor the One Who Waters Is Anything"

"So then" is ὥστε (hōste). It introduces the result or the proper expectation. If God's Word causes the growth, then the planter and the waterer are not anything. Paul does not say their work is worthless. He planted for eighteen months. He says that next to what causes growth, they do not count as anything in themselves.

> The agricultural analogy should also be understood as well. A farmer does not cause growth. Planting a seed does not cause growth. Watering the ground does not cause growth. The farmer simply does what is expected of him. He understands the process he knows the rules. When he plants and waters proper growth occurs.

The verse uses three present participles: the one who plants, the one who waters, and the One who causes the growth. The first two are left without names. Paul is no longer talking about Paul and Apollos as persons. He is talking about the roles. Any man who plants and any man who waters stands in the same place. But the third participle has a name. "God who causes the growth." In the Greek, God is the last word of the sentence, and the sentence rests on Him.

This is the answer to "I am of Paul." You cannot belong to a man who is not anything. The Corinthians had already heard it in Chapter 1: "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:13).

Verse 8: "He Who Plants and He Who Waters Are One"

The word "one" is ἕν (hen), the neuter form again. It means one thing. Paul doesn't say they are one person. He says they are one in what they are doing. The planter and the waterer work the same field, for the same Owner, toward the same harvest. There is no rivalry between planting and watering. A field needs both.

That means the parties at Corinth were the church's idea, not the teachers' idea. Paul and Apollos were not competitors. Near the end of the letter Paul writes, "But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity" (16:12). Paul wanted Apollos back in Corinth. The Corinthians had made two camps out of two men who were on the same side.

"But Each Will Receive His Own Reward According to His Own Labor"

The servants are one in purpose, but they are not one in accountability. Each one answers for himself. Paul uses the word ἴδιος (idios), "his own," twice: his own reward, his own labor.

The word for reward is μισθός (misthos), "payment, wages." It is pay for work done. The word for labor is κόπος (kopos), which means toil, hard work. It does not mean results. Paul does not say each will be rewarded according to his growth, because the growth belongs to God. Neither man can make the seed come up. What each man can do is labor faithfully, and that is what is rewarded. The next chapter says it this way: "In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (4:2).

The verb "will receive" is future. The reward is not handed out now. It comes later, on a day the letter will soon name. Paul tells the church to wait for it: "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (4:5).

Standing and Reward

We need to keep two things apart that are often mixed together. Salvation is not a reward. It is a gift, and it is not earned by labor. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The believer's standing was settled at the start of this letter. Christ "will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:8).

Reward is a different matter. It is measured by labor, and it is given at the judgment seat. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat (bema) of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad

(worthless)" (2 Corinthians 5:10). The believer's salvation is not on trial there. His work is. Paul will make that plain in 3:15, where a man's work is tested and yet "he himself will be saved." We'll take that up next lesson. For now it's enough to see the line Paul draws in verse 8. Standing comes by grace. Reward comes by labor.

Verse 9: "For We Are God's Fellow Workers"

The Greek sentence is short, and one word stands out. Θεοῦ γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί· θεοῦ γεώργιον, θεοῦ οἰκοδομή ἐστε. Word for word it reads, "God's, for, we are, fellow workers; God's field, God's building you are." The word θεός (theos), comes first in all three phrases. In Greek the word put first is the word stressed. Paul wants the church to hear one thing three times. God's. God's. God's.

The word for fellow workers is συνεργός (sunergos), "one who works with." There is an honest question about how to read it here. It can be read two ways.

The first reading is "fellow workers with God." Older English versions translate it that way, and it is a possible translation. When Paul puts a person's name with this word, he usually means the one he works with. "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3). "Timothy my fellow worker greets you" (Romans 16:21). In each case, "my fellow worker" means one who works with me. By the same pattern, "God's fellow workers" would mean those who work with God.

The second reading is "fellow workers who belong to God." They work together with one another, and they are God's. The next two phrases use the same form, and there it can only mean ownership. "God's field" is the field that belongs to God. "God's building" is the building that belongs to God. It would be natural to read the first phrase the same way as the two that follow. Verse 8 has just said that the planter and the waterer "are one," so the working together is between the servants. And verse 7 has just said that the servants are not anything. It would be odd for Paul to lower them to nothing and then, two verses later, raise them to God's partners.

The Scriptures use both ideas elsewhere. 2 Corinthians 6:1 - "And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain." The words "with Him" are in italics because they are supplied. Paul also calls Timothy "our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ" (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Context dictates that the second reading is the better fit for this passage. It follows the pattern of the three parallel phrases and the flow of verses 5-8. But the difference is slight. On either reading the servant gets no credit. If he works with God, he is the junior partner in work God alone makes grow. If he belongs to God, he is a hired hand in God's field. "God's fellow workers" is a careful translation, because it keeps the Greek order and leaves the question where Paul left it. What Paul makes unmistakable is the word he repeats. The workers, the field, and the building all belong to God.

"You Are God's Field, God's Building"

The word for field is γεώργιον (geōrgion), "cultivated land." It isn't wild ground. It's ground someone owns and works. The word for building is οἰκοδομή (oikodomē). It can mean a structure, or the work of building it.

Notice the shift in pronouns. "We are" fellow workers. "You are" the field and the building. The Corinthians had been acting as if they belonged to the teachers: of Paul, of Apollos. Paul turns it around. The teachers belong to God, and so does the assembly. The Corinthians are not the owners; the workers are not the owners. Everything is God's.

Verse 9 is also the hinge between the two pictures. "God's field" closes the farming picture of verses 6-8. "God's building" opens the building picture that runs from verse 10 through verse 17. Paul will carry the building picture to its height in a few verses: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (3:16).

Verse 10: "According to the Grace of God Which Was Given to Me"

Before Paul calls himself a master builder, he says where the skill came from. "According to" is κατά (kata), "in keeping with." His work matched the grace he was given. The word for grace is χάρις (charis), and "was given" is a passive participle. Paul did not take this role. It was given to him (Galatians 1:11-12).

This is how Paul always speaks of his apostleship. "Of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:7-8). And to this congregation he writes later, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (15:10). Verse 5 said "as the Lord gave." Verse 10 applies it to Paul himself.

"Like a Wise Master Builder I Laid a Foundation"

The word is ἀρχιτέκτων (architektōn). Our word "architect" comes from it, but the Greek word meant more than a man who draws plans. It was the master builder, the one in charge of construction, a general contractor. The first half of the word, ἀρχι (archi), means chief. The second half, τέκτων (tektōn), is a craftsman or builder. It's the word used of the Lord in Mark 6:3: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?"

The word "wise" is σοφός (sophos). Since Chapter 1, Paul has been setting the wisdom of the world against the wisdom of God. He was sent to preach "not in cleverness of speech" (1:17), literally "wisdom." Now he calls himself wise, but only in the sense of a builder who knows his trade. The skill was given by grace, and it was used to lay the right foundation in the right place.

"I laid" is τίθημι (tithēmi), set, put in place. It was done once, and it was finished. A foundation is not laid again every week. Paul laid it at Corinth during the eighteen months of Acts 18. His practice was to go where no one else had laid one: "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not

where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation" (Romans 15:20).

What was the foundation? The very next verse names it: "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (3:11). Paul laid it by preaching Him. "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:2). Later in this letter he spells out what he preached: "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:1-4).

Paul laid this foundation as an apostle. We found in 2:12-13 that the "we" who received the Spirit who is from God were the apostles. They received the things freely given by God, and they spoke them "not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit" (2:13). The apostles received the mind of Christ and handed it on in words and teaching. That's why the Church is said to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20). The foundation is Christ, laid by apostolic preaching, and it's laid once.

"And Another Is Building on It"

The verb changes tense. "I laid" is past and finished. "Is building on" is ἐποικοδομέω e(poikodomeō), "builds upon," is in the present tense and was still happening in Corinth. The foundation is done. The building is still under construction.

Paul does not name the other builder. Apollos would fit, since he came after Paul. But the next sentence widens it to "each man," and verses 12-15 speak of "any man." Paul leaves the builder unnamed so that the warning reaches every teacher who comes after him, at Corinth and beyond.

"But Each Man Must Be Careful How He Builds on It"

The verb is βλέπω (blepō), "to see," here as a command in the present tense, "let him keep watching." It's a word for being on guard, to see, peer in, and watch carefully. The warning is about "how," πῶς (pōs). It is not about whether a man builds. It is about the way he builds and what he builds with. The next verses take that up: gold, silver, and precious stones, or wood, hay, and straw, and a day that will test it with fire (3:12-13).

There are two ways a builder can fail. He can build poorly on the right foundation. That's the subject of 3:12-15. Or he can try to lay a different foundation, which 3:11 says cannot be done. Paul guarded that foundation fiercely. To the Galatians he wrote, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8-9). And he warned this same church: "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you

receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully" (2 Corinthians 11:4).

The first duty of anyone who builds is to make sure he is building on Jesus Christ, the Christ of the gospel, and no other. No other savior. No other gospel. No addition to the cross. Only then does the question of materials come up. Each man must be careful how he builds on it.

Summary / Application

The Corinthians had lined up behind their favorite teachers. Paul answered by telling them what teachers are. They are servants, and they are the means by which people believe, not the object of belief. Each one has only what the Lord gave him. One plants, another waters, and God causes the growth the whole time, so the servants are not anything in themselves. They are one in purpose, and each will receive his own reward for his own labor, at a time still to come. Standing is by grace. Reward is by labor. The workers are God's, the field is God's, and the building is God's. Paul, by grace, laid the foundation once, and that foundation is Jesus Christ. Everyone who comes after him builds on it, and each must watch how he builds.

Follow the message, not the man. "I am of Paul" did not end at Corinth. Today it may sound like "my pastor," "my theologian," or "the man who wrote my study Bible." Many of us have learned a great deal from good teachers, and we should be thankful for them. But a teacher is a servant. Test what he says the way the Bereans did: "for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Know what a teacher is. A servant is a tool in the Lord's hand. That frees the listener from putting a man on a pedestal, and it frees the teacher from thinking it all depends on him. Paul planted for a year and a half and then left. The church kept growing because God kept causing the growth.

Value labor, not results. Reward is according to labor. A Sunday school teacher with five students and a preacher with five thousand answer the same question: were you faithful with what the Lord gave you? "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Remember who owns the church. Beth Haven is God's field and God's building. It doesn't belong to its teachers, its founders, or the people who have attended longest. It belongs to Him, and so do we.

Guard the foundation. Before you ask if a teacher is effective, ask whether he is building on Jesus Christ and Him crucified. A different gospel or another savior is not a weaker foundation. It is no foundation at all. A teacher that is not clear on the Gospel must be set aside.

Paul has told every builder to be careful how he builds. Next time, we will see why. "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (3:13).