

It's ALL The Work Of God

1Cor 3.1-10

PRAYER

Please turn to First Corinthians, chapter 3. We'll be reading verses 1-10...

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 3:1** And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not *mere* men? ⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but **God** was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but **God** who causes the growth. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but *each* will receive *his own* reward according to *his own* labor. ⁹ For we are **God's fellow-workers**; you are **God's field**, **God's building**. ¹⁰ 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.

Lynn and I like to work in the garden. Yes, I know that's strange. But we derive a lot of pleasure from watching God's plants and flowers grow, seeing how they change over time. We learn a lot of lessons from digging, planting, feeding, watering, and pruning. And of course we have to pull weeds, so they don't choke the other plants, and so things are orderly. It's constant work to keep the beds clean of them. Every day we have to find the weeds that *literally* grew up over night.

Our Christian life is a lot like that. Sinful habits die hard, and they spring up fast. Sin, like a weed, doesn't need a lot of nurturing; it grows and multiplies *all on its own*. Now, some weeds are called "wild flowers," because they can be *very* attractive. But they're out of place in our garden, and they're destructive. That's why even pretty weeds, ones we're tempted to keep, need to be pulled – *just like sin*. Here's the thing about pulling weeds though: when they start to grow, all you see is a green shoot. They look pretty much like all the other flowers. So when Lynn says to me, "pull up those weeds over there" I have to ask her, "Which ones are the weeds?" I can't always tell the difference. And I don't want to pull up her flowers by mistake. So I have to ask which ones are the flowers we *purchased and planted for our pleasure*. Which ones do we *own*? Keep that thought.

In chapter 3 of First Corinthians, Paul is helping those believers identify the weeds of a *fleshly mind*, to distinguish them from the fruit of a *spiritual mind*. He wants them to put away the things of the fleshly mind, the things which oppose Christ, and live according to the spiritual mind, which is the mind of Christ.

“The spiritual person is the one who understands the centrality of the gospel. He understands the mind of the Lord, and is able to judge and evaluate all of life from this perspective, because he has the MIND of CHRIST.” *K. Aichele*

The spiritual mind is cross-centered and Christ-centered. It recognizes all that God has done to ensure the salvation and freedom of those who belong to God. It is a humble mind, because it knows that *all the work has been done by God*.

By contrast, the fleshly mind is a *self-centered* or *world-centered* mind. This is a mind that wants to gratify its own desires, AND it wants to gratify the desires of others – *it wants to live in the eyes of other men*, as if it belonged to *them* and was accountable to *them*, or as if it owned them, and they were accountable to it. The fleshly mind demands loyalty and obedience to its demands. It wants to *own* us, as if Christ had never set us free. It is opposed to Christ, opposed to God, and opposed to the work of the Gospel.

As believers, we want to show that *we are owned by God, not by the world, and not by our flesh*. We are **GOD**'s flowers, and not *wild*-flowers. We want to show that we *belong* in God's Garden, that we were purchased and planted by Him for His pleasure – *that we are wheat, and not tares*. What do we need to show that?

Well, God gave us His Spirit to help us show who we belong to. Specifically, the Spirit helps us gain Christ's perspective on things. He helps us gain a **dominant** spiritual mind – dominant, because *the flesh remains with us*; it must be **subdued**. 1Cor 2:12 says we were given the Spirit, “*so we may know the things freely given to us by God*.” So that we may KNOW these things. This Greek word for “know” means to *see* or to *recognize* the things of God for what they are, just like *telling weeds from flowers*. The things OF God are the things that belong TO God. The *spiritual mind*, knowing what belongs to God, is able to choose the things of God **over** the things of the flesh. And so the spiritual mind is able to govern the fleshly mind, to **master** it. It recognizes the desires of the flesh, but it learns **not** to respond to them in blind obedience. It recognizes the temptations of the world, but it learns **not** to respond to them in blind obedience. *It sees Christ as Lord over all things, because it sees all things as belonging to Christ*.

That was a challenge for the Corinthians. They prided themselves on their own knowledge, wisdom, and wealth – all of which came from their world. They simply added Christ to their lives, without replacing their lives with Christ. That’s true for most new Christians. ***They need to grow out of that.*** Unfortunately, this is true for many long-time Christians as well. When Paul says that, *for him*, “**To live is Christ...**” (Phil 1.21) we may not know what he means. We may still be *fleshly-minded*, like the infant believers at Corinth. It takes a mature, *spiritual* mind to understand what Paul meant by that. It isn’t easy to learn to be **governed** in all things by a spiritual mind, and to **master** the desires of the flesh.

As you’ve probably experienced, we still have sinful habits that our fleshly mind cultivated in us over a lifetime. **And so our flesh is at war with the Spirit in us;** it resists change, and it fights against the things of God.

^{NAU} **1 Peter 2:11** Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

^{ESV} **Galatians 5:17** For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, ***to keep you from doing the things you want to do.***

This says that your flesh keeps you from doing the things you *want* to do, were *meant* to do, and *called* to do, which is the work of Christ – the work of the Gospel, and of godliness. So *we must learn to discern* which desires are born of our flesh, and which are born of the Spirit. That’s not always clear until we look at it from the standpoint of ***ownership – of acknowledging what belongs to God.***

Please look again at First Corinthians, chapter 3. We’ll take it line by line this time, and draw out of it this theme of ownership. *We’re gripping the sharp sword that divides soul [what we think is ours] from spirit [what is actually God’s] –*

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 3:1** And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to *infants* in Christ. [Paul isn’t condemning them as non-believers; but he *does* speak to them as fleshly, childish, immature – *ungrown*.]
² I gave you **milk** to drink, **not solid food**; [Why not?] **for you were not yet able to receive it.** Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ **for you are still fleshly.** [Paul now gives them an example of what the fleshly mind acts like, so they can identify it.] **For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?** [i.e. like non-believers. If you think about it, *jealousy* and *strife* are ownership issues. **Jealousy** is when you become

enraged if someone disregards your ownership of something or someone. **Strife** occurs when others reject the idea that YOU own the only answer – because *they're* convinced **THEY** own the only answer.]

⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," **are you not mere men?** [Some of your translations may say “fleshly” or “carnal” at the end of verse 4 instead of “mere men.” Either one is OK. Paul is asking them to honestly examine themselves, to consider the centrality of the cross in their lives. They have placed their faith in *mere* men, *instruments* of Christ, instead of in Christ *alone*. Paul is saying *it's fleshly and childish to do that, to find your identity in other people*, instead of in *Christ*. We can do that with a spouse, or even our children.]

⁵ **What** then is Apollos? And **what** is Paul? **Servants** through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶ – I planted, Apollos watered, **but God was causing the growth.** [He's saying that God is the only One to be honored here – not men. *God has done all the work*. Paul is *encouraging* them with this! He affirms that they are growing as a church and as individual followers of Christ. But they are **STILL** infants. And Paul wants them to know **WHY** their growth is stilted. *They are governing their lives with a fleshly mind* – a mind that won't acknowledge Christ is *Lord* – *owner* of all things, and *giver* of all things.]

Verse 7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything [i.e. anything to be honored or revered], **but GOD** who causes the growth. [So don't exalt a man, thinking that **HE** is the one who somehow imparted wisdom to you. Instead, remember that salvation and wisdom come from **GOD!** A *divine origin*.] And now comes a transition in Paul's exhortation. He tells them to take their eyes **OFF** the work and the calling of **OTHER** men, and begin to consider their **OWN** work, and their **OWN** calling. *Gospel work is something all of us are called to do*. Stop living second-hand through the labor of other workers. **BE** a worker. **GROW**.

Verse 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one [i.e. they work as a team]; **but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.** [So team effort is required, **but** there will be *individual* rewards based on *individual* work.]

⁹ For **WE** are God's *fellow-workers* [i.e. Paul and Apollos are fellow-workers who belong to God; this doesn't mean they're God's *fellows*; they're not His equals]; **YOU**, Paul says, **are God's field, God's building.** [Paul is letting them know where they are in the scheme of things – they need to be worked on, like a field being tended until harvest, or a building that is under construction. So he and Apollos are working **among** them, as *God's means* of building them up. Paul doesn't work **for**

them – he doesn't *belong to* them. He works for and reports to and belongs to **Christ**, his Lord and Master. So must *they*, for there is one Head over all.

That's why he and Apollos are NOT to be used for name-dropping . "I know PAUL; so I'm *important* because PAUL is important." It's as if they're looking to Paul and Apollos for their personal worth, *but not to Christ*. We do that too. We may know famous people, or do important work, or own valuable things that we believe give us value in our own sight or in the sight of others. Whenever we do that, *we stop looking to Christ*. We stop considering the cross and our own inability to do anything apart from him. We set aside the mind of Christ, the spiritual mind, in favor of the fleshly mind, and we give it **free reign**.

The opposite can be just as true – we may think we have *nothing* of value, and so we believe we **are** nothing; we lack all the things the world uses to give value. That kind of mind *also* stops looking to Christ for its worth; it stops considering the cross and what it cost to redeem it; it likewise ignores its complete inability apart from Christ, because it ignores the infinite ability of Christ. And so a "woe is me" attitude is likewise born of a fleshly mind that opposes Christ, *despises* him.

Verse 10 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* – [each *believer*, each *worker* – *each one of us*] – must be careful how he [*himself*] builds on it. We may be working in concert with others to do the work, but we each report to Christ for an accounting – we each have a responsibility to use the gifts we've been freely given to accomplish the work that has been assigned to us. Verse 10 is referring to the reward mentioned in verse 8. **We'll come back to that next week**. For today, let's see how this issue of ownership plays out in real life.

Maybe you think distinguishing between the things of the flesh and those of the Spirit is blatantly obvious. *Consider the possibility that it may not be so clear*. If someone is in financial need, and **asks** you for help, is that coming from their flesh, or from the Spirit? And if you choose to **give** them help, is that coming from your flesh, or from the Spirit? Can the very same action of asking for help, or giving help, be **wrongly motivated**? Can we do the right thing for the wrong reason? The answer is **YES**. It's entirely possible to help others, and even love others, for selfish reasons, for reasons that ignore God, Christ, and the cross.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 17:9** The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Well, if that's true (and it is), then HOW *in the world* are we going to distinguish our fleshly desires from the desires of the Spirit?? When

we THINK we're doing the right thing, for the right reasons, how can we be sure? Because if we can't be sure, then how are we going to grow and become mature? The answer isn't one that any of us relishes. To grow, we must be *tested* by God.

David said in **Psalm 26:1-2**, ^{ESV} *Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Examine me, O LORD, and try me; Test my mind and my heart.*

Do you know how God examined and tested David? He sent *Bathsheba* to David in a moment of weakness. I'm sure you know the story (2Sam 11, 12). God sends US into trials in our moment of weakness too. What he tests is our understanding of His ownership – *that we are His and He is ours*; that we are not our own – nor does anything or anyone in this world belong to us. *God owns it all*; and *that's why it's all the work of God*. But we often forget that very simple fact.

Do you think other people are your servants, not God's? That they exist for your purposes? Do you think you can treat them, and speak to them, and speak about them however you want to, as if they belonged to you, and not to God? Do you speak about the President and the Congress that way? What about your spouse or your children? The folks you work with? Friends, neighbors, or perhaps enemies? What about other believers? When you drive, are you like me? Do you think that all those people are driving on your road, and so you resent their very presence?

What enables us to distinguish the desires of the flesh from those of the Spirit, is seeing and accepting that *God owns it ALL, including US, and our circumstances*. The Spirit was given to us so that we might recognize “*all the things that GOD has freely GIVEN to us*” – not things that **belong** to us, but things that are **entrusted** to us as *stewards* who loyally serve our Master.

Jesus said, ^{ESV} **Matthew 6:24** "*No one can serve two masters [i.e. he can't be owned by two masters], for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Paul gets the concept*. When he says, “*To live is Christ*”, he means that he has only ONE owner, ONE mission, and ONE identity. **He is Christ's**. And so he knows that every desire of his flesh to *master* him OPPOSES Christ's **right** to *exclusive* ownership. *Christ died on the cross to redeem us in order to purchase a special people for himself, as his possession*. (Mal 3.17-18; Tit. 2.14; 1Pet 2.9) In Romans 8, verses 4-9, everything Paul has to say about the flesh and the Spirit points to this same issue of *ownership*.

[We] do not walk [or live] according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who are according to the flesh **set their minds** on the things of the flesh; but those who are *according to* the Spirit, [on] the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is **death**, but the mind set on the Spirit is **life** and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is **hostile** toward God; for it does not **subject itself** to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*; ⁸ and those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God. ⁹ **However, you are not in the flesh** but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone **does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him**. (Rom 8:4-9 ^{NAS}) **He does not BELONG to Him**.

If someone is being driven and controlled by the desires of his flesh, and sets his mind on the things of the flesh, he **belongs** to his flesh; he **serves** his flesh; he **satisfies** and **pleases** his flesh. His Lord and Master is **not Christ**, but his **flesh**. When we sin, and we **all** do, we **choose** to satisfy whatever our flesh wants for itself. We reject God's ownership. In effect we **change** our mind from a spiritual mind to a fleshly mind. The flesh says to us, as Satan said to Jesus, ^{ESV} **Matthew 4:9** "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship ME." You see, for the believer, sin is all about **ownership**, about whom we **choose** to serve.

Remember how Jesus responded when he was tested in the desert? ^{ESV} **Matthew 4:10** Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him ONLY shall you serve." **That's exclusive ownership**. When Nathan confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba, he made it an issue of **ownership**. He described a rich man who had brazenly stolen and killed a lamb that belonged to a poor man, to satisfy his own needs. David, who had been a shepherd, was outraged by the tale. David said the man should die. Nathan said "YOU are the man." David fell on his knees before God.

He then wrote ^{ESV} **Psalm 51:4-12** Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, ⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. [David is speaking of his **flesh**, of being *born* with a **fleshly mind**] ⁶ Behold, you delight in truth **in the inward being**, and you **teach me wisdom in the secret heart**. [God has given us his wisdom by his Spirit who dwells in our inward being to reveal to us the things of God.]

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, **and renew a right spirit within me**. ¹¹ Cast me not away from your

presence, and **take not your Holy Spirit from me.** ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and **uphold me with a willing spirit.**

God has done all that in Christ. A willing spirit is a spirit that knows who owns *everything*. We are NOT to be **double-minded** – double-owned – or else we will be unstable in all our ways. Our heart must be PURE, *single-minded* (Jas 1.8; 4.8); *Christ-minded, God-owned.*

So **WHAT does the Spirit use to enable our spiritual mind to govern our fleshly mind?** What have we been given that distinguishes worldly *thoughts* from heavenly *thoughts*, worldly *solutions* from heavenly *solutions*, and worldly *wisdom* from heavenly *wisdom*? **What helps us recognize God's ownership of everything?** You know the answer: We've been given the Word of God as a lamp unto our feet.

^{NAU} **Hebrews 4:12** For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and **able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**

⁶³ "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; *the words that I have spoken to you are SPIRIT and they are LIFE.* ⁶⁴ "But – BUT – there are some of you who do not believe." (Joh 6:63-64 ^{NAS})

That's what's going on at Corinth. They have been given the Gospel. They *know* the Gospel, but apparently they don't *believe* the Gospel **in a transforming way** – they continue to let their flesh govern their lives, instead of letting the Spirit govern them **by the Word of God.**

And so Paul, loving them enough to correct their misunderstanding, and by their request, has written them this wonderful letter of *encouragement*. Paul provides them with standards by which to **discern** the things of the Spirit, to see and know what it means to be the people of God – *to bear the name and identity of Christ.*

We are God-Owned,
Spirit-led,
Christ-centered,
Scripture-fed, and
Called by God to work in His field.

It's obvious to Paul that,

- These Corinthians haven't reached the end of themselves *yet*.
- They haven't come to grips with their own inadequacy and sinfulness *yet*.
- They haven't become cross-centered and cross-driven *yet*.
- They don't understand the mind of Christ *yet*.

This is cause for concern, but it is NOT cause for despair. They HAVE the mind of Christ in the word of God. They just need to EMPLOY it. They need to **grow up**. They must not remain children, because if they do, they will never accomplish the things to which they have been called. They will never have the spiritual mind to know all the things that God has freely given them. Instead,

They will be paupers when God would have them rich.

They will be lame, when God would have them run for the prize.

They will be near-sighted, when God would have them see the heavens.

They will be hard of hearing, when God would have them sing sweet harmonies.

They will be weary and heavy-laden, when God would carry their burdens.

They will be defeated, when God would have them **more** than conquerors.

I began today with the example of gardening, and of learning to distinguish weeds from flowers. Lynn and I knew little or nothing about gardening. So we bought books. We got our hands dirty. We learned by doing. We watched the result of our labors over time. We saw what happened if we ignored our daily chores. As we read the books, and did what they said, we gained wisdom and experience. We became more skilled at gardening. We matured.

Yes, you know where this is leading. God's Word is the wisdom of our Master Gardener and Teacher, recorded for our instruction and guidance concerning the things of God. It contains all we need for life and godliness. (2 Peter 1:2-3)

We cannot grow apart from the Word of God. It can't be done. I don't know of ANY mature Christian who does not feed on the Word of God as if his life depended on it. He not only reads and studies it, but he **meditates** on it day and night, so that he may be sure to **do** what it says (Josh 1.8). To say that we can be cross-centered and Spirit-led, without being Scripture-FED, is sheer nonsense; it's *foolishness*. Feed on Christ; chew on his words; meditate on them, so that you may grow, and become wise *for the work*. ^{NAU} **Psalm 119:99 I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation.**

May our Great God cause us to grow. We are *His precious possession*. May we not only live, but live *well*, in Jesus' name and for His sake. He is our Savior, Head, and eternal Intercessor. *That is by God's design from the beginning*.

And by God's unstoppable will, His design for us is being carried out, *today*. And for that, ALL thanksgiving, ALL glory, honor, praise, obedience, submission, and reverence is due our Great God, who is *over* all, and *through* all, and *in* all.
(Eph 4:6 NIV)

And so it is ALL the work of God.

May this knowledge give you peace
as you enjoy God's favor and His grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.