

Rewarded as God's labourers

Corinthians Explained

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 3; 1 Corinthians 3:9

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Congregation, the main text for this morning is from 1 Corinthians 3:9. We have to go through the verse 5 through 15 but 9 is a key verse.

9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

So far.

Rewarded as God's laborers. So that's the theme, you see laborers in verse 9, "we are laborers together with God," so that's what the theme is, "Rewarded as God's labourers." In the first place, on God's farmland. It says, "ye are God's husbandry," that relates to farmland, farming, the husbandman. Secondly, on God's construction site, "ye are God's building." And in the third place, a great reward as you see, for example, in verse 8, "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward." And that comes back to verse 14, "If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward." So rewarded as God's laborers: on God's farmland, on God's construction site, a great reward.

So what is the context again? The Apostle Paul is concerned about the spiritual life in the congregation of Corinth. It was a beloved congregation. He worked there for many years. He has left in the meantime but he notices friction and divisions, not among the population itself but among God's people, God's children adopted by the Lord, belonging to the same family of the Lord, having a new heart, having a new life, a new spirit, drawn out of the darkness, having a walk on the narrow pathway, and they disagree and they fight. God's people, that's not good, is it? That's carnal. The one says, "I'm for Apollos." The other one says, "I'm for Cephas. I'm for Paul." So much division and in this chapter there seemed to be only two factions but in the previous chapter we saw at least three, these divisions, people disagree and there are hard feelings and anger and pointing fingers and gossiping, and not believing that he is really a child of God, that he is wrong.

"And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is

among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?" So the Apostle Paul is explaining in this chapter something about God's servants, that they are different. Paul is not Apollos and Apollos is not Paul but they work together with God on his farmland, on his building site, and they should be one. It doesn't make any sense when people working on the same farmland, that they just disagree and can't cooperate. It doesn't make any sense. When you're building a house together, you have to work together. One is doing this and another one is doing that. So he's explaining that the servants of God and that the laborers in the church need to be united for the same purpose, for the crop of the land and for the house that will be built.

So that's why he says in verse 5, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos," who are we? Are we so important? "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but," nothing more, "but ministers." You know that "minister" has kind of a ring to us today, right? "Minister, yeah, that's the minister. That's the minister of finance. That's the minister of the church." So it has kind of an honorable sound to it but not originally. The minister is someone who serves. It can be translated "attender," as "a waiter," as "a servant," as "a slave." So who is Paul? Who is Apollos but only ministers," that's all. They are only ministers. They only serve. The one is not more important than the other.

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed?" So the Lord used those men. He used Paul, he used Apollos only as ministers, only as tools. They could not do anything themselves. They mean nothing but God uses them as ministers so that they may believe. So that's apparently the issue of believing. That's their main purpose, that sinners may believe.

"But ministers by whom ye believed." So the Apostle Paul is used and Apollos and Cephas and others are used. The servants were used in the hands of the Almighty God so that people came to the faith and came to trust the word of God, and came to understand the truth, and the word of God was brought to their heart. The Lord did that and gave that saving faith in the hearts, and the Apostle Paul and Apollos are nothing more but ministers by whom ye believed.

You know, that's what I hope for too, that I may be a minister unto you and unto them that believe, that the Lord may work that faith in the hearts. Not only agree, not only say, yes, not only to be entertained, not only be united, but to believe. Oh, that real faith is necessary. May the Lord bless us, let's pray for a blessing upon the laborers because that's what it is about.

"But ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man." They're all different. Paul is not like Apollos, and I don't know the differences but I think the Apostle Paul was more educated, had more insight, was deeper, and Apollos was maybe more friendly, maybe more visiting the people and connecting, and maybe not an introvert. And there are so many different things in the ministers and the one has more connection with this one, and the other feels more close to the other one, but they're all different, but they are all working on the same field, on the same farmland, working on the same

construction site and they should be one, and they should work to the same purpose, and the congregation should feel that. It's about the unity of the church.

So they are different, "even as the Lord gave to every man." So no wonder that people have preferences for this minister and that commentary and that's normal. I have that too. We all have that, as long as we keep in mind that the purpose is, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." Do you see the farmland? Someone is planting, planting young plants row after row in a greenhouse or in the field. It's planting poinsettias or something, probably not, other plants, planting on the farm, and that's, of course, the first thing you do. You can't water before you plant, right? Well, maybe you can but that's maybe not the wise thing to do. So they first plant and then someone else waters on God's farmland.

"I have planted." So I was the first one in Corinth. I planted those little plants, those young plants of faith as an instrument of God, by God's grace. "I have planted." Does the Apostle Paul say that he has converted people? That he has changed people himself? That it was his gift or his eloquence or what is it? No, he doesn't mean that. He says, "You know, I was used to be a planter and Apollos, someone else waters, but God gave the increase." God gave the increase. What does that mean, God gave the increase? Well, that God gave the life in it and that's still true, right? You know, the farmers or the greenhouse owners and the people, they plant and they water. What else can they do, blow or talk or what can they do? They have to just wait and let nature do its work. No, let God do the work. God is giving more leaves and flowers. That's God doing it.

So the Apostle Paul says, "The one is planting, the other one is watering, but it's God who gives the growth. He lets it grow." And that's also with spiritual life in God's farmland, someone plants by God's grace, and someone waters, or maybe the same person waters, but we can't do anything, God is doing the work. He gives the increase by the application of the word. He brings to the heart, he changes people's lives. It is God doing it so what are the people saying? "I'm for Apollos. I'm for Paul. I'm for Cephas." Really? They do nothing. They only plant and water and they can't do anything because it happens that we plant and that we water and then there still will be disaster, right? Does it not happen in farmlands and greenhouses that the whole crop is kind of lost because something went wrong? A few days not enough water or something, not enough fertilizer, not enough light or something and they can just throw it all away. So the planting and that watering is necessary and God uses that work but it's God who is doing the work, and if that's the case, let the church then be united. Let those ministers be united. Let the congregations not just have too many preferences because they're all one.

So the Apostle Paul uses the example of planting, church planting. He also uses different examples, if I may insert them to give just a fuller picture of that. I read in 1 Corinthians 4, the next chapter, verse 15, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." So the Apostle Paul writes in the next chapter, "You can have all the instructors, 10,000 of them, but I'm your father. I was at your cradle. I have begotten you. I was the first one planting it. I have begotten you. I have delivered you through the gospel."

And we read in 2 Corinthians 2:15, "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish." Or in 2 Corinthians 4, a little different example of light, the light goes on, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ," through this, the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, "who is the image of God, should shine unto them." And that's what conversion is as well, conversion is that you are begotten by God, conversion is that you taste the savor of God, it's that you receive the light of the gospel of Christ.

So, "Now he that planteth," verse 8, "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one." Do you see that? Is someone who plants in the greenhouse more important than the person watering? Of course not. You need both. So, "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour." We save that for the third thought, right? "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry," you work on God's farmland.

So let's go back to verse 5, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed?" May I revisit that, that belief? Why believe? Because there is also hope and there is love, but faith is the heart of it. We believe in the justification by faith, not the justification by hope, not the justification by love. You need love and hope as well and many more things you need, the knowledge of your sins, right, and repentance and sorrow, but you're not saved by your sorrow, you're not saved by your tears, you're not saved by your love, you're not saved by your hope and expectation. The heart is faith, by faith only. Think of the Reformation, by faith only, sola fide. So that's why he says, "but ministers by whom ye believed."

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." That's what he preached, Paul, so that people would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Preaching Christ by presenting him, showing him, revealing him, offering him, encouraging people to come unto him, take the obstacles away that are bothering them, explaining how genuine the gospel is. So the Apostle Paul, his focal point in the preaching was Christ.

So two more texts and then we go to the next thought. I read in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." That's what the Apostle Paul preached, that the Lord Jesus has come to save that which was lost. So I hope you hear that. And John 3:36, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

So wrapping it up, the first thought, the Apostle Paul wants unity. He wants people to go for the same thing, for the young plants to grow, to increase on the farmland. So Paul and Apollos, they have to work together and the congregation has to look at them as fellow laborers. You are laborers together with God. Do you see that in verse 9? "For we are labourers together with God," coworkers, instruments. So the ministers, those are the ministers, tools in God's hand.

So it's God's work, right? Acts 11, "And the hand of the Lord was with them," the hand of the Lord was with them, "and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord." How come? And the hand of the Lord was with them. He gave the increase. "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." So the Apostle Paul was speaking and it did not do anything so God needed to give the increase and he opened her heart so that she listened and attended unto the word with the Apostle Paul had spoken.

But let's continue. Look at verse 9, "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry," that was on the farmland, "ye are God's building." So it's the second thought, the building site, the construction site. That's kind of a difficult piece at first so let me just give you the picture first and then the application, the explanation and the application.

So we're at a building site, what's the first thing you're doing? The foundation, of course. So we would dig in the ground and lay the foundation first. And after the foundation, they use stones. It says precious stones, precious stones does not mean gems and amethysts and emeralds. No, precious stones means fitting stones so on the foundation they put stones next to each other and on top of each other. And sometimes they make arches with those stones and the whole ceiling, everything is some precious stones. And they use silver and gold also for adornments. So I see a house or a palace, rather, built by a foundation and precious stones and gold and silver. It's a palace, gold and silver.

But a little away from the palace, I see also a construction site and I see some workers being busy with the foundation. That's a good foundation, absolutely nothing wrong with that. Good foundation. And some stones on there, it looks promising, it looks kind of almost the same. Then they have some gold and silver and then they use sticks, wooden sticks, and hay, and grass on the roof. That's still fine for an average family. They can live in that house of foundation and some stones and some wood and some stubble and some hay, and also worked in with the clay in the walls. It looks fine for just a poor family. At least they have a grass roof over their head.

But now there's a fire in town, a raging fire like those fires in London, that where whole sections of the whole city were burned. So there's a fire here and that first palace with the foundation and the stones and the silver and the gold hardly has any damage. But that other house, you see the flames going up and the roof is gone and the wood is taken and the walls are just falling over. I see the person and they've just escaped. He just escaped. He just fled.

So let us now read, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation. I was wise," the Apostle Paul says, "I don't deny it. I'm a wise builder. I'm not dumb. As a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth, and what he builds thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." That's the foundation, the doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones," good, "wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day," you could write Day with a capital letter, "for the day shall declare it," the day of fire is coming, "because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." Do you see him fleeing out of the building? He just made it.

So what is the Apostle Paul talking about? He's saying, "Well, we are at the construction site and the foundation has been laid, and someone else agrees with that same foundation, a different minister. One minister lays the foundation and another one agrees on that and builds on that foundation also." So they work together on that construction site, the foundation and the precious stones and the silver and the gold, but now I see some workers putting grass and stubble and wood also, and I just stand there saying, "What are you doing?" I'm frowning and I warn them and say, "Be careful what you're doing because I agree with you partially, I agree that you had the right foundation, and I agree with using those precious stones, but I don't agree with this, that you put wood and stubble and hay there. You shouldn't do that. Please don't do that! And if you do that, when the day comes, it will be proven that you were wrong and you will have no reward and you will hardly be able to escape yourself."

So what does that mean? Who are the builders and who is that master builder? All God's true servants build on that foundation. They lay that foundation. They plant and they also build and they don't lay any other foundation than this, than Jesus Christ and him crucified. They agree on that, but although ministers may agree on that foundation, it is still possible that ministers, God-fearing ministers, put grass and hay and wood on there as well, and they shouldn't do that. That's wrong. And they are still God's people, they're still God's servants, that's the confusing thing here. Verse 15, "he himself shall be saved. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved." Do you see that in verse 15? "He himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

So the Apostle Paul was a builder and he lay down the foremost doctrine of the salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we must do that time and again, preaching that holy name, pointing to that foundation. There is no other foundation, and who has laid that foundation? In a way, in a metaphor, the Apostle Paul is laying the foundation and the ministers are doing that, if you really think about that. What we mean is they lay the doctrine of salvation as the most important stone. The salvation itself is given by God, right? He has given his only begotten Son. He has laid him down. So God loved the world that he has given his only begotten Son. He has provided the cornerstone. It's the Lord doing it. He is the builder. He gives the increase in the farmland and he gives also what's needed also on the worksite, on the building site.

But the Apostle Paul from the very beginning of his service in Corinth made it clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only name, the only Savior, the only door, the only road, the narrow road, and that nobody can be saved without him. He laid that foundation and if

someone does not lay that foundation, it's a false teacher. Not just wrong, not just erring here and there as we will talk about later, but it's false. So the real issue of the difference between a false and a genuine teacher is that they preach Christ. The foundation which is Jesus Christ, it says. So you can have a beautiful sermon, a beautiful story for entertaining and comforting or whatever, sobering, but if Christ is missing, the foundation is missing, it's not just wrong, it's false. It's false. It's giving the wrong hope, the wrong expectation. It must be built on the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermons are preached for that purpose, that people seek salvation in that foundation and build on that foundation and nowhere else. So people can have texts and beautiful verses in the Bible that surface in their head, right, and touched by that, but if it is not Christ, it's nothing. We need a Savior. We need to be broken down to such an extent that we can't live without him anymore. We need so much knowledge of misery that we say, "Give me Jesus or I die!"

So that is so necessary, laborers together with God to lay that foundation. And I'm sure the ministers, called ministers also use precious stones on that foundation. I don't know what the precious stones are. Maybe you say, "Give me, please, some examples." Well, I'm reluctant to do that but let me try. What about the five points of Calvinism? That is so down-to-earth. Total corruption. Unconditional election. Total depravity. We already had that. Limited atonement. Irresistible grace. Persecution of the saints. Those are precious stones and they fit so well on that foundation that was laid. Or think of the three points of the Heidelberg Catechism: misery, salvation, gratitude. It just fits perfectly with that foundation, the truth, the main truth, the truth of the word of the living God.

Some pieces are silver. So beautiful. Some pieces of gold. So precious. What a building. But it is possible that called ministers, saved ministers, are using wood. What is that? You'd better think it through yourself but let me help you. Something that's not in the Bible, certain things that are not in the Bible and they are preached and the people are told that they have to abide with that, they need to know that. It's not in the Bible. That's hay. Something trivial. Something blown out of context. Hiding the gospel. Warning people not to believe. Telling people that the traffic light is red. Discouraging people. Your traditions, all the traditions being more important than Jesus Christ. You know when the fire comes on the day of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, then the fire will burn and there will be nothing left of all the wood and the stubble and the hay. Nothing left and that person, that minister flees and hardly makes it. He is saved as by fire. He does not lose salvation but he does not receive a reward.

Now that's the closest we can come in this chapter, right? So ministers are warned, right? Ministers are warned, "Preach the gospel. Preach the foundation. Put stones on there, silver and gold and nothing else." But what about the audiences? That's not in this chapter right now but, you know, you have to think about the audience, people hearing all the time, always hearing or wanting to hear, loving the stubble, loving the hay, loving the wood. That's happening. It happens that in our dear congregations, people love the hay and love the trivial things and the traditions of men more than the foundation, than the stones. And when their death comes, if they have no foundation and no Christ and no

stones, and only hay and wood and stubble, they won't escape. It will be over and they will see it, it was worth nothing.

So what a warning. "If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward." But, "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." So if you like to check commentaries, please do so and you will find out that those pieces like those examples like wood and hay and stubble refer to trivial not biblical things which can hide the true gospel. So it's not sufficient that a minister is converted. It's not sufficient that a minister is called. It's not sufficient the minister preaches the gospel. It means he must not add the other stuff. It makes it worse.

And yet a reward, our last thought. First we sing.

Congregation, we saw two times the word "reward," right? Reward in verse 8, "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour." So this thought at the end, "according to his own labour." So ministers have to work hard and they will be rewarded according to their labor, right? That's what it says, no? So they are not rewarded according to their success on earth, they're not rewarded according to their fame, or rewarded according to their eloquence or their gifts, they will be rewarded according to their labor, their labor in the fear of God, in digging into the word, in praying, in meditating, in pastoring. And it's possible that a servant, a missionary, is working in a small corner of this world and that nobody knows about him, and it is a very small church of a few people, and that he is laboring and laboring and laboring, and he will receive a reward according to his own labor. So don't make mistakes. You know, the Lord knows about the inner recesses of the heart and he knows who's laboring and what type of laboring, and then I think who is sufficient, and I feel my shortcomings in laboring, in sacrificing, and just giving.

"And every man," every servant, "shall receive his own reward." So what reward? Well, let me quote from Matthew 25 about the parable of the talents. "His lord said unto him," when he came back with five talents, another five, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." So that's the reward, "enter into the joy of thy lord." What does that mean? Whose joy? His joy, the servant's joy or God's joy, the Lord Jesus' joy? Yes, his joy. To enter into his joy. So the Lord Jesus joying in his people, and his people rejoicing in him. Joy, mutual joy on both sides, and they may enter into the joy of the Lord.

"Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many." So I gather that it is also that there are differences in heaven, no? I can't, seriously I cannot make anything else of it. According to their labor the Lord will reward them differently. Some will be closer to the Lamb, others are a distance. You know, those who had the right foundation and used a few stones but mainly wood and stubble and hay, they're standing quite a ways away. They are yet saved but that is by fire. And others who have been

building with stone and silver and gold, they may be closer to the Lamb according to their labors. "Thou faithful servant, over many things I will set you."

Let me support that with two more texts that there are differences in heaven. Daniel 12:3, "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." Reverend Christian uses that text also to prove it, differences in heaven. Again, Daniel 12:3, "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many," they that turn many, "to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." You know, I would like the reward, I would like a reward like that. To turn many to righteousness, I would like that wisdom, "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament." And not only for the joy there but also the joy here. What a joy there is who desires the office of a bishop, desires a good thing. There's no more joyful work than to preach Christ Jesus, the foundation, him crucified. There's nothing better to do, right, young men? Ask the Lord if he may do that work in his vineyard.

And also another text proving this kind of from the dark side. You know this text, Matthew 10:15, "Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city." More tolerable. For some people hell is not as bad as it is for others. Hell is bad, infinitely bad, but it's even worse somehow, I don't know how, it's even worse for them that have been the closest to the truth. You know, having set your whole life in a little truth, your whole life in the truth until you're in your 70s, 80s, 90s, having heard it and heard it and heard it and still dying without grace, there's nothing worse than that. Nothing worse. That is hell multiplied. It will be more tolerable for the people in town and the Sikhs and the Buddhists and the Muslims, it will be easier on them, unto them that haven't heard of the word than unto us. So there are different places in heaven we heard, according to their labors, and different places in hell as well.

My father died, my dear father, and I was studying Ephesians 2 this week with the students and we came to Ephesians 2:7 speaking about heaven, for example, and it kind of touched me. I thought that's what I may believe my father is experiencing, the reward. What reward? How would you word it? What is the greatest reward you can think of? "That in the ages to come he might shew," to you, "the exceeding riches of," what? "Of his grace." How is he doing that? How showing the exceeding riches of his grace? Well, "in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus." So I may believe that my father is experiencing the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards him. And a friend wrote me a letter from Holland and he said, "Friend, I hope that someday you may glorify God with him and rejoice with your father in him."

So that's why there is farmland, so that's why there is a construction site, and the Lord is not finished yet, and the preaching goes on yet, and the laborers are sent out yet. 1 Corinthians 9:18, what does it say there? "What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel." So what is his reward? Verily, absolutely true, I have no doubt

about this, this is the heart. What's my reward then? "Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge."

So that's how I may end. That's my reward, that I may preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ without charge, without money, without price. What holds you back? Oh, sinners, what's holding you back? The light is not on red, it's green. But do you even want to come? Or will it be hay and stubble? And this minister who is building on the foundation and adding hay and stubble and wood, he will yet be saved but not you if you like the stubble more than the Lord Jesus Christ.

So focus on the real thing. Go to the bottom of it and don't rest until you, yourself, see that foundation and believe in that foundation, and see those stones and the silver and the gold, and that that might be your eternal pleasure. Amen.