

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2026

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Please turn up in your Bibles, 1 Corinthians chapter 3, page 953 in the Black Church Bibles. If you need one, you're at the door. Some of you will know the name Roy Keane. He was a well-known footballer, played for Man United, played for the Republic of Ireland.

He retired from football and went into punditry. And one of his great moments of punditry, and there are actually many great moments of Roy Keane punditry, he made a couple of seasons ago when a Liverpool player had gone to remonstrate with the linesman.

And they cut to the studio where the pundits were all sitting, and they were talking about whether this was an appropriate thing to do. And Roy Keane said, why is he doing that? What a baby. I mean, what a big baby.

And they were all kind of a bit shocked that he'd said, the thing about Roy Keane's punditry is he says what everybody else is thinking. He says it out loud. What a big baby, he said. And then he paused, and they all sort of looked at each other awkwardly, and he said, baby.

And they all fell apart laughing. And they laughed because it was awkward, and they were trying to release tension. Because it is, when you think about it, it is a pretty scathing put-down.

[1 : 22] To call someone a baby, or to tell someone to grow up, is a humiliating insult. And yet, it is exactly that language that the Apostle Paul uses with the Corinthian church this morning.

Chapter 3, verse 1 says, My brothers could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

You're behaving like babies. He's saying, because you're unspiritual, because you're people of the flesh, you're behaving like babies.

It's a humiliating insult, and yet these are the words that the Apostle uses. Why does he speak like this? Well, because, verse 3, he's saying, He's coming back to the factions and the rivalry that we saw in chapter 1.

They've grown up in the church around these different ministers and their different approaches to ministry. Verse 4, There are some who say, I follow Paul. Others say, I follow Apollos. Factions have formed in the life of the church.

[2 : 28] Rivalries have begun between these groups, and it has led to jealousy and strife in the church. It's interesting that this is what causes Paul to be so direct.

This jealousy and strife in the life of the church and their relationships together is what he describes as unspiritual, as fleshly, kind of of the flesh.

When we think of that, we think of nights out and soho. That's what somebody's talking about when they say, oh, it's very fleshly. That's why they talk about the flesh pots of the West End, that kind of thing.

But Paul's actually talking about jealousy and strife. He's not speaking to unbelievers in the congregation. He's talking about immature Christians. They're behaving in this fleshly, worldly way. They're babies. Babies. But they are babies in Christ, you see, he says. It is possible, we need to see, for a church to be established and to grow, for that church to be blessed and gifted by God, and for those people in the church to care about their theology.

[3 : 31] We see that throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, and for them to think that things are going well, and for the apostle to call them worldly babies when it comes to reality.

They see themselves one way. They think of themselves as mature. They think of themselves as really careful about the scriptures and about their theology. But actually, the apostle says, the reality is, you're just like the world, and you're babies.

Regardless of your gifts, regardless of how kind God has been to them in the past, which you saw at the beginning of the letter, their factions and their strife show them to be spiritual infants. Now,

the image of babies that Paul uses here has been carefully chosen, and it is striking. On the one hand, Paul is saying that real Christians can make a mess. Real Christians can stink the place out. Real Christians can do the stupidest things without realizing that's what babies are like. And Paul rebukes the Corinthian church because they are doing this. They're doing this while being in Christ, he's saying. And the criticism is especially biting, as I've said, given how mature the Corinthian church think that they were.

[4 : 41] Now, there's nothing wrong with babies. Obviously, we love babies, but they should grow out of those things. They should stop being babies at some point in their lives. And that is what Paul rebukes.

Look at verse 2. He's saying, listen, when I was with you a number of years ago, I fed you with a bottle. That's okay. But you haven't moved on from that. You should at least be on those squeeze pouches with the pureed vegetables or something like that.

But as it is, you haven't grown an inch. It's quite a rebuke. It's scathing. It's humiliating. It's very critical. So what is it that people who have gone wrong on this point need to grasp?

Well, that's what Paul lays out. Two points. The first big point is this. He's saying, listen, you're fighting about the ministers. The big point is this. Ministers are really just servants. That's point number one.

Ministers are really just servants. Verse 5. What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each.

[5 : 45] By definition, a servant is always at the service of someone else. They're always working for or representing or acting for someone greater. And they know that they'll have to answer to that superior for what they've done.

They're a servant. They're put at the service of others. And they are accountable to that other person. And that service and accountability both apply in the case of ministers. That's what Paul is saying.

On the one hand, Paul says simply, they're gardeners. That's verses 6 to 9. Ministers, they're servants. They're gardeners. It is God who brings the growth. Gardeners, it is God who brings the growth.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, 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. Each leader had their job to do.

[6 : 50] Paul planted the gospel seed. Apollos then came along after him and watered it. In that way, verse 8, they are doing different parts of the same job. They are one. It is one job.

The plant image makes the whole point really well. And you think about it. In your garden, you can plant the seed and you can water the seed, but you can't bring anything out of the soil unless God does it.

You can add fertilizer. You can add water. You can put glass around it. Get a greenhouse. You can tend to it. You can stare at it. You can will it to grow, but nothing will happen unless God does what is required in the soil and everything else to make it grow.

It is the same spiritually. Someone tells you the message of Christ and him crucified. They invite you to church. They engage with your questions.

All of those are good things to do, and we should be doing that with our unbelieving friends. But nothing will happen unless God gives the growth. Paul and Apollos were the instruments through whom, verse 5, the Corinthians believed.

[7 : 59] But they didn't save the Corinthians. It was the Lord who granted the faith. Do you notice in the verses how God's name is repeated to make this point?

In the end, it is all the work of God. God did it. God did it. We're God's fellow workers. God's field. God's building. All of that. Fixating, therefore, on certain leaders misses the point.

Why? Verse 7. Neither he who plants nor he who waters is... Have a look. Anything. Paul's talking about himself.

He's the mighty apostle Paul, commissioned by the risen Christ himself. Not anything. He's talking about the great pastor Apollos. And he's saying they're just servants.

Just servants tending the garden, nothing more. Verse 9. They are God's fellow workers. And the Corinthians are what God has grown through their labors. Spiritual growth is something of a mystery.

[9 : 05] Got to acknowledge that. And it is possible that two people can hear the same truth. One responds in faith and the other is left unmoved. Two children born to the same parents, raised in the same home, baptized by the same minister in the same church, hearing the same preaching, week in and week out, having the same prayers, prayed for them.

One never knows a time when they didn't know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. The other is the president of the humanist society. Why? Well, because of the direct and gracious intervention of God, the Holy Spirit.

It is God who does the work. It is God who gives the growth. Can you hear my voice this morning? God uses means.

He uses parents and friends and preachers. But salvation and spiritual growth don't happen because of that human person. If you can see the word of the cross, the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified as God's power for salvation, and you want it, and you cling to it, and you're never going to move from there.

If you can hear the Bible being preached this morning as God speaking to you. I'm just the gardener. God is doing the work. What is going on in Corinth is a kind of early form of a celebrity pastor culture.

[10 : 28] People gravitating around certain leaders and saying that they're the special ones. And people that are following the other leaders, well, they're idiots, that kind of thing. That's where the jealousy and the strife is coming in.

We've got to be really careful. We remember that those men are simply gardeners. It is God who gives the growth. We have our own versions of this kind of cult of the leader. I spoke on Exchange Messages just this week with Harry Ovey.

You know, minister in training here. He and Emma, Emma, his wife, have gone off to a Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. And they're part of Christ's Covenant Church. And Kevin DeYoung is the minister at Christ's Covenant Church. Kevin DeYoung is great. He's a great minister of the gospel. Very faithful man. And he has a great ministry there.

But he is a celebrity preacher. And Harry was telling me this week that their little boy has just been born recently, Caleb, that somebody came up to Emma in the church and said, you must be delighted that Caleb gets to be baptized by Pastor Kevin.

[11 : 33] That's not on Pastor Kevin. That's not on Harry and Emma. But what has happened is that there is a culture that recognizes that he's special. What would Paul say to that? He would say, come with me to the Ecclesiastical Cresce.

We'll get you some milk. He's just a gardener. We hear from time to time people say, I used to work with pastors such and such.

I was a trainee under pastors such and such. What would Paul say? He'd say, let me get you some theological milk formula you need to grow up, you big baby. Of course, we're to honor our leaders. But if even Paul and Apollos were just servants in God's garden, so was and so is everyone else who follows.

God has given them the gifts. God has used them as he will. They're just servants. It is God who brings the fruit. Second thing I think we need to recognize is that if only God can build a genuine church, his people, and especially his ministers, must ask him to do this.

[12 : 44] I've tried to press this point because that's what I think Paul is doing here in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. That it is God who does the work. If it is God who does the work, we need to ask him to do the work. That is how he has organized things.

We are to lean on him and plead with him that he will give the growth. Pray for the ministry here at the church. Especially if you're a member of the church, pray that God would be at work.

We've got our mission coming up at the beginning of next month. We meet at 5.15 in there on a Sunday evening to pray that God would give the growth. That he would be at work through all the evangelism that we're trying to do.

Pray for the weekly ministry. There's so much going on in the life of the church. We have hundreds of people coming through the doors of this church every week who don't know and love the Lord Jesus. Pray that even in those regular ministries in the life of the church, God would give the

growth.

He would use those of us who are here to serve as the servants that he will bless to bring the growth into those people's lives. Pray for the weekly ministry of this event, the Lord's Day, when we gather for worship morning and evening.

[13 : 51] Pray for the ministry of the church. Your prayers for God to work will be the means that he uses to bring the growth. If he is the one who does it, we need to ask him to do it.

Expect, I want to say as well, expect your elders and your ministers to be praying. This should be a significant part of the time that we spend serving you. Time that you can't get us, you can't see us because we're praying, pleading that the Lord would give the growth.

And I can say to our elders, don't let this slip. Keep pleading with God to empower us for the labor in his garden that we've been called to. Ministers are gardeners.

It is God who brings the growth. Then verse 10, can you see Paul takes up another image? God's field becomes God's building. And now he says ministers are builders. It is God who will test their work.

That's 10 to 15. Look at verse 10. 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 one take care how he builds upon it.

[14 : 58] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now, if anyone builds on the 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 one has done. Paul laid the foundation in Corinth.

He preached Christ, the only true foundation there is. And now, after the passing of time, someone else is building on it. There is a new ministry in Corinth. But Paul is warning them. He's saying, listen, take care.

Because a day is coming when their work will be scrutinized. The structure will be tested by fire. And only the right kind of building will come through the fire and endure.

The Corinthians, they're assessing the merits of their chosen leader. Paul's saying, look, there's a bigger testing that's coming. There's a bigger assessment that's coming. And you can leave that to God. The quality of the work that you're trying to extol one against another, leave that to God.

[15 : 58] He will do the testing. And you see, to be clear, Paul is talking here about ministers and their ministries. He's not talking about Christians in general. Nor does the mention of fire here refer to any idea of the purging of sins.

The fire will test the minister's work and disclose the quality of that work. And some ministries, he's saying, will withstand the fire and be glorified through it. And some will simply vanish.

They'll be taken up in the fire. The pastor will be saved. Brilliant work doesn't earn salvation. And lackluster work won't lose it. We're all saved the same way. By God. By grace.

Through faith alone. But while Reverend Smith then will be in glory, Reverend Smith's online ministry, his books, his conference talks will not.

Because they were motivated by the wrong things. He will suffer the loss, verse 15, of not being able to bring the fruit of his work with him into glory. Because he built with the wrong materials.

[17 : 03] A builder can only build in line with the existing foundation. The foundation sets the course for everything else. And for ministers, true ministers, that foundation is Christ. So his materials, the materials that he builds on Christ must be consistent with that foundation.

And you can only build on Christ with excellent materials. So what are those excellent materials? Gold, silver, precious stones. Gold, silver, precious stones. That's obviously not literal. But we are told that they endure.

And verse 14, you see verse 14, they are related to a reward. So what are the materials? Well I think Paul is talking about Christians. He's talking about people.

He's talking about Christians. Remember when he wrote to the Thessalonian church? He told them that they are his glory and his crown. What he's saying there is that their being present in glory on the last day will be his reward.

Paul will be able on the last day to look around and see his heavenly reward in the people that the Lord has saved through his ministry. And it's the same here, I think. He's saying the excellent materials built on Christ are the people who have heard the word of the cross and responded in

faith.

[18 : 15] They are the gold and the silver and the precious stones. And they are being built into a building in which God will dwell. Look at verse 16.

Verse 16, So what he's saying here is that the last day judgment will reveal whether a minister built his ministry on Christ and him crucified, a ministry that brings men and women into the glory of eternity, or whether he built on his rhetoric, his humor, his human wisdom, that built something that looked outwardly impressive but that actually was burnt up in the end.

One commentator says this, The gold and silver and precious stones that are built on this foundation of Jesus Christ are eternal souls. Wood, hay, and stubble are popularity, trendy relevance, blurbs from important scribes, and lost eternal souls.

So can you see here's another reason why ministers should resist the lofty speech and words of plausible wisdom that he talked about in chapter 2.

Not only do those words not accomplish anything substantial in the present, a day is coming when they will be exposed and reduced to ash. In talking to the Corinthians this way, Paul is helping us grasp the sort of ministry that we should want in our church.

[19 : 53] Not one that is built on leaders or human wisdom that will vanish, but a ministry that is marked by humble labor in God's garden building as God would have us to build.

You want ministers who see their work as get people to glory ministry. So Paul wants the Corinthians to grasp that ministers are really servants.

Don't have your factions about ministers. They're really just servants. But then he shifts to talk about the Corinthians themselves. And here he wants them to see. So if the first point is that ministers are just really just servants, point number two, the church is really precious.

The church is really precious. Who has God made the church to be? And how does he relate to her? 16. 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 that temple. The image of the temple, of course, is common in the New Testament.

[21 : 11] The Apostle Peter uses it most clearly in his first letter. He's not talking about physical bricks and mortar. He's talking about people again. And Paul here says that Christians make up this building corporately.

He uses the plural, Do you not know? Do you, church, corporate people, do you not know? All of you make up the singular temple which is filled by the Holy Spirit who dwells among you when you gather.

The Spirit dwells among you as he does with us here this morning as we are gathered as an expression of this temple. So Christians, each of us are individual bricks and stones and beams and pillars.

And if you are in Christ, if you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus, you are gold, silver, precious stones that he is bringing together to make God's temple, God's house, the place where God dwells.

Why does Paul tell them this about themselves? Why does he press how precious they are and how precious God's church is?

[22 : 19] Well then, think again about the issue. What is it? Their divisions. How out of step is it that they would be dividing something this precious?

Why are they working to pull apart what God is building? Jealousy, strife, bitterness, rivalry. If you understand who you really are as the church of the living God, you will not do that.

You just won't go there. Paul underscores this, verse 17. Have a look. Destroying the church's unity is to put yourself in the most perilous position. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

Can you see how important church unity is? Not just because it's nicer for us all. Not just because it's easier to belong to a harmonious group than it is to deal with strife all the time.

But because of how precious the church is to God. Because of how God feels about division.

Australian commentator Paul Barnett says this.

[23 : 26] It's very stark. The teacher who has built badly may barely escape the flames of God's judgment. Not so the divider of the Lord's people in his holy assembly.

Paul's words are the severest warning to us. That divisive comment doesn't seem like such a good idea, does it, when you hear that?

That growing bitterness towards a brother or sister in the church, it doesn't taste quite so good, does it? I said a couple of weeks ago, I am grateful for our real unity that we enjoy here in Ealing. Despite a wide range of views on all kinds of things. I am grateful that there's nobody trying to play the ministers off against each other.

Long may it be the case. Because of who you are. We're not a club. We're not a committee. We're not a team. We're not a business.

[24 : 25] We're a church. We're not a church. The holy temple of God. Of course, conflict exists. Relationships can get twisted up. Not pushing a particular issue that annoys you is a difficult thing.

Because we're sinful. But the New Testament gives us ways that we can legitimately resolve these issues. And where they arise, we must do that. But we must do that because of who we are.

The holy temple of God. So, verse 18. Don't deceive yourself about the nature of true wisdom.

The world around us has a different metric from what makes good leaders. Impressive. Decisive.

Hard-hitting. Have a different vision of what constitutes a good and a beautiful way to live.

More, bigger, better, faster, stronger, and so on. And the Corinthians and their culture have had their heads turned by that kind of vision. And he's saying, you need to grow up. Grow up out of that.

[25 : 30] And he says, if your culture esteems you or esteems your church in some way as wise by their standards, we should be concerned. They either don't yet know what you believe or you have compromised in some way.

And Paul says in that case, verse 18, we must return to the folly of the cross. We must return, repent, and go back to the foolishness of a cross-shaped life so that we become wise in the eyes of God.

And he closes out this chapter with two motivations to do that. If you see that your ministers are just really servants and you see how precious the church is to God, you will put aside the wisdom of the world that pursues jealousy and strife and rivalry and that kind of thing.

Why? Well, because first in the end, God will bring down all worldly pretense. God will bring it down.

Paul quotes Job 5, Psalm 94 to make this point. The world's wisdom with its accolades and its honors and its impressiveness, putting your trust in men.

Don't live for those things because God thinks they're futile. And in the end, he'll be, he'll reduce it all to nothing. He'll bring it all down. It's going nowhere. Your jealousy, your strife, your rivalry, all of the things that motivate that, it's going nowhere.

[26 : 42] God will take it down in the end. But secondly, look at this. Verse 21. Look at what God has for you if you pursue his way. If you put aside jealousy and strife, if you pursue Christ and him crucified, and you submit yourself under his word.

Chapter 2, the stuff we heard last week. If we put, No one boasts in men, for all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, 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. Paul is saying all things are yours, whether it's Bible teachers in Corinth, or the things of this world, or life, or death.

And we can throw in the present and the future, he says. They all belong to the saints. And those saints in turn belong to Christ, who in turn belongs to God. This is who you are, and this is what you have in Christ.

You have everything that is essential and good and beautiful. Everything that will in the end endure through the judgment into glory. You have it.

[27 : 51] So, do you feel the security? You belong to God. You're his field. You're his building.

And he will get you to glory. Feel the security in that. But also, do you see the blessing? Everything is yours. Why would someone who stands to inherit that level of riches get caught up with jealousy and strife around mere men?

Why would someone who stands to inherit that level of riches envy the wisdom of the world and the world's way of doing things? One writer says this, A king on the balcony of his palace doesn't look down on the street in order to envy the crow that struts in the gutter.

Paul is saying, Take your eyes off the world's way of doing things. It's unspiritual and it's fleshly and it's immature. Instead, remember that your ministers are servants.

Remember that in the life of the church, we are precious to the living God. And we're going to inherit all things. So don't settle for anything less.

[29 : 09] Let's pray.