

High Peaks Bible Fellowship

Ministers Are Merely God's Servants 1 Corinthians 3:5-23

What ARE Ministers? (1 Cor 3:5)

- The Corinthians were claiming loyalty to specific leaders, so Paul uses himself and Apollos as representatives for all ministers.
- He asks an important question about himself and his fellow-worker: “What is Apollos? What is Paul?”
- The Corinthians were claiming to belong to a specific faction, and to raise Apollos or Paul to an exalted position of leadership and authority over others. So Paul clarifies what he and Apollos really ARE!
- Ministers are Servants (*diakonos*) = a lowly serving man; one who executes the commands of another; one who runs errands or waits on tables or does menial tasks. The term *diakonos* denotes servants in distinction from masters. Paul and Apollos were not *masters* but *servants*.
- “Through whom” = ministers are merely instruments in God’s hands for accomplishing His purposes.
- Paul immediately makes it clear that the men they thought of as the exalted leaders of factions were in reality merely helpers or “delivery boys” in God’s program for salvation.

An Illustration from Agriculture (1 Cor 3:6-9)

Principle: Different workers serve different functions.

- Paul served one function while Apollos served another function. Both were essential to the overall plan.
- “God was causing the growth” (*auxano*) = to cause growth; to generate an increase; to cause to become greater. The imperfect tense is used to indicate the continuous involvement of God in the work both of Paul and Apollos.



Principle: Different workers are of equal value.

- “Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything.” They all equal zero = they are not anything in terms of actually causing the growth.
- Their value is as instruments in the hands of God. This simply indicates that they all sink into insignificance in comparison to God’s work in accomplishing His purposes.

Principle: Different workers are not rivals; they are one in purpose.

- If no one planted, the watering would be useless. If no one watered, the planting would be worthless. They must literally function as a single unit.
- They have one goal and one purpose, so they are not rivals or competitors.

Principle: Workers are distinct in their responsibilities as well as in their rewards.

- “Each will receive his own reward according to his labor.” Reward (*misthos*) = payment for work done; wages. This is not a reward in the sense of an undeserved gift.

Summary of this Illustration

- “We are God’s fellow-workers” = literally, “it is of God that we are fellow-workers.” Ministers are simply field hands in God’s garden; they are fellow-laborers employed by God and are under His direction.
- “You are God’s field” = the ones being ministered to are the garden. God is at work to cause growth in our lives, and often He uses the efforts of ministers to accomplish His purposes.
- “God’s building” = transitions to the next illustration.

An Illustration from Architecture (1 Cor 3:10-17)

- “According to the grace of God” = Everything Paul accomplished was due to the empowerment of God in his life. Paul was merely the instrument in God’s hand.
- “A master builder” (*architekton*) = “chief technician” (not the actual Master Architect).
- “Laid a foundation, another is building on it” = Paul’s foundation was solid – they did not need to lay another foundation. Other teachers only needed to continue building on that original foundation according to the original plan of the first architect.
- “But each man must be careful how he builds.” *blepo* = to see or perceive; to watch carefully and to pay attention; to consider or contemplate.
- “A foundation other than the one which was laid.” This specifies exactly what foundation Paul laid = the truths concerning the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the only adequate foundation for the church, and no other foundation could be laid by subsequent ministers in the church. Paul had done his original work very well.
- “Gold, silver, precious (costly) stones, wood, hay, straw” = these materials represent things that are extremely valuable and are not easily destroyed by fire vs. those that are relatively inexpensive and can be completely consumed by fire.



Gold/Silver/Stone	Wood/Hay/Straw
More costly and more difficult to find – they take time to acquire and to build into a structure.	Obtained quickly and cheaply, and an impressive structure can be built almost overnight.
Represent the serious, significant, and valuable truths of the Faith which will stand the test of time.	Not necessarily false teaching or heretical doctrines, but meaningless, trivial, or useless things; teaching that is mediocre and of minimal value.

- “Each man’s work will become evident (*phaneros*)” = shining, clearly and publicly seen.
- “The day will show it (*de/low*)” = to declare the quality. The definite article (“the day”) points to a specific day/event. Which day is this? It must refer to a future day when believers’ works will be evaluated by the Lord. This occurs at the judgment seat of Christ in heaven after the resurrection of Church-age saints – the Rapture (see 2 Cor 5:10).
- “Fire will test (*dokimazo*) the quality” = here Paul uses an illustration from the field of metallurgy, which is the process of refining building materials. *dokimazo* was used of heating metals to test whether they were genuine or not. Here the test of quality is being applied to the work of ministers – it is not a test of the person, but a test of his ministry efforts.
- “If the work remains = Reward .” The only work that can remain after such a test is the work that is analogous to the gold, silver, and precious stones (the valuable materials). If ministers do valuable work, then they will receive their just reward (*misthos*), the payment for services rendered.
- “If the work is burned up = Suffer loss.” If ministers do work that is frivolous or worthless (analogous to the

perishable materials), then they will not receive whatever wages they thought they were due! This is what constitutes “loss” – they must have had a previous expectation of gain which will be withheld from them. What they produced was not worthy of wages.

- “He himself will be saved” = Paul makes it very clear that this is not an evaluation of a person, but of the quality of work that a minister has produced.
- “As through fire” = after having his work evaluated by testing. The idea here is that whatever is valuable in a minister’s work shall be rewarded, and the man himself will be saved; but whatever is not valuable in a minister’s work will burn up, and the man himself shall still be saved.
- The context is discussing the work of ministers, not the lives of believers in general. Therefore, this verse can never be interpreted to justify the false doctrine of “Purgatory” – that every believer must somehow pass through the flames of *purgatory* before being found worthy of heaven.
- “You are God’s temple” (*naos*) = in 1 Cor 3:9 Paul had said, “You are God’s field, God’s building.” Here he tells them exactly what kind of building they are – they are God’s “holy place.”
- “The Spirit of God dwells in you” = makes His home in the believer. Believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
- “Destroys the temple of God, God will destroy (*phtheiro*) him” = to shrivel, wither, waste, spoil, or ruin. If a minister builds on the true foundation using worthless materials, this will waste or spoil that foundation, and God will repay him in kind for what he has done.
- “Holy, and that is what you are” = not a restatement that they are God’s temple, but a reminder of their status of belonging to God and being set apart for His use. In their quarreling and factions, the Corinthians had forgotten their holy calling.

The Conclusion From These Illustrations (1 Cor 3:18-23)

- “Let no man deceive himself” = this implies that some of the Corinthians were actually deceiving themselves! The context specifies that their self-deception involved believing that they were wise according to the world’s standards of wisdom.
- “Thinks he is wise in this age” = this describes a man that has the reputation of wisdom among the people of this generation; the world regards him as wise in the same way that the philosophers of this world are considered to be wise.
- “He must become foolish so that he may become wise” = he must be willing to be regarded as a fool by the world. Paul had already explained that God’s wisdom appears foolish to the intellectual. A person is truly wise when he embraces the truths of God that the world regards as foolishness.
- “The wisdom of this world is foolishness before God” = see 1 Cor 1:20
- Paul quotes Job 5:13. This is the description Eliphaz gave of the wise politicians of the world. Their schemes are thwarted and the snares they laid for others end up capturing them! This proves the foolishness of the world’s wisdom, since God uses their own wisdom to catch the ones who think themselves so wise.
- Paul then quotes Psalms 94:11. David explains how the Lord knows that the finite, limited thought processes of mankind fall far short of His own real wisdom. In that sense, they are foolish, empty, and useless.
- “Let no one boast in men” = this takes us back to 1 Cor 1:29, 31. Paul summarizes what the Corinthians were doing when they emphasized the different parties or factions within the church.
- “For all things belong to you” = Paul gives another reason why they should not align themselves in parties or factions under different leaders. Since they benefited from the labor of all of their ministers, and since their ministers belonged to Christ (and everything belongs to God), it was improper to split up into factions, as if they had received their benefits from any one person.
- “You belong to Christ” = You must not devote yourselves to any man, but devote yourselves to Christ because you belong to Him.

Points of Application

- In our ministry activities, let us “build” on the one true foundation using the best possible building materials. We must refuse to pander to the worldly desires of those to whom we minister, but instead we should provide the best possible spiritual nourishment. This passage is a tremendous challenge for the Christian worker. It tells us that our effort will be evaluated and rewarded by God – but we will not receive a reward if what we provide is worthless or frivolous.
- A Bible that is not studied carefully cannot be followed carefully, and where it is not followed there will be divisions in the churches. It is essential that we continue studying the Word of God.
- Pride is always at the heart of mere human wisdom. We must submit our own thoughts, feelings, and desires to the indwelling Spirit of God, and let the new nature dominate or control the old, fleshly man.
- Workers can till the soil, plant the seed, water and tend the garden – but without God there would be NO growth. Let’s praise and honor God who is the source of life and the cause of all growth! Always remember that “We belong to Christ!” (1 Cor 3:23)

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Our primary purpose is to uphold the truths of the Word of God.

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

Our primary responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)