

1 Corinthians 3B (2013)

- You've probably seen the bumper sticker, "As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in school."
 - Tests are moments of truth, as they say
 - Students can make all the claims they like about what they know or how hard they've studied
 - But in the end, the truth comes out when the test is taken
 - Tests are designed to reveal the truth about someone's accomplishments

Except for the time the Texas Aggie tried taking a true/false final exam by flipping a coin to get his answers: heads for true and tails for false. He finished the exam quickly and everything was going great...until he decided to flip the coin again to check his answers.

- And tests don't stop when we graduate from school
 - Many professions have competency or certification exams
 - And we take tests to get a driver's license, to be promoted, to apply for citizenship
- And each of these tests serves a similar purpose: to reveal the truth about our accomplishments
 - When we do well on these tests, we have good reason to feel good about our accomplishments
 - But when we score poorly, then we suffer the consequences
 - Men like to boast about themselves before the test, like a sports team before the big game
 - But the truth is revealed in the testing of that boast, and then only those who have performed well will have reason to boast
- The Corinthian church has been boasting lately, according to Paul's letter
 - They were boasting about things that they had no reason to boast about
 - They boasted over how they came to faith

- They boasted over which apostle brought them the good news
- Paul explained that such things are not eligible for boasting, because they are the work of God alone
- They came to faith as a result of the power of God, and so boasting about such things was completely inappropriate
 - In the same way that fans of a sports team have little reason to boast over their team winning a game
 - The fans had nothing to do with the win
 - They are simply the recipients of a good outcome as a result of someone else's work
- So it is for us in faith...we receive the good outcome of God's power and work
- Last time we studied in this book, we heard Paul tell the church that their boasting was evidence of their spiritual immaturity
 - They were thinking like fleshly men, not as spiritual men
 - They were still thinking the way the world thinks, rather than thinking with the wisdom God grants by the Spirit
- Ironically, while Corinthians were busy boasting, they were oblivious to a coming test
 - There is a test coming for these believers – and for all believers
 - And this test will reveal the truth about how we served the Lord
 - The test puts to rest all boasting
 - And we must prepare if we are to do well
 - So while Paul wants the church to cease boasting about useless, earthly achievements, he wants to redirect that energy toward healthy, spiritually wise achievements
 - Beginning in v.5

1Cor. 3:5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

1Cor. 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

[1Cor. 3:7](#) So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

- Paul now asks the church, what is Apollos? What is Paul?
 - The church had assigned value to these men, and then by association they claimed some of that value for themselves
 - If Apollos was a great man, then those he converted or baptized were great men as well
 - If Paul was a hero to the faith, then those Paul recruited were greatly blessed by association
 - This was the fleshly, worldly thinking that Paul said was evidence of immaturity, because that's the way the world thinks
 - So Paul asks what is Apollos' worth? How should a person evaluate Paul's importance? How does God see these men?
 - And then Paul answers the question with great humility
 - He says they were merely servants through whom God brought faith to the church
 - The Lord gave opportunity for belief, Paul says
 - It wasn't Paul or Apollos that brought the faith to the church
 - It was God
 - But He did it through the service of Paul and Apollos
 - If we imagine a different circumstance, we see Paul's point clearly
 - Imagine you were awarded a great sum of money from a wealthy businessman
 - And when the day came for the money to be awarded to you, the rich businessman sent a courier to your home with an envelope containing a check
 - How much significance do you assign to that courier?
 - Do you make a point of telling people that the courier made you rich? Do you even notice his name?

- Or do you credit the rich businessman?
- Paul says he and Apollos are like that courier in the sense that they were merely carrying out the orders of their Master, the Lord
 - Paul uses the analogy of farming to explain his role
 - He planted the Gospel
 - Paul brought the word of God (the seed) and placed it in the ground of the Corinthians' hearts
 - And new faith blossomed
 - Later, God sent Apollos to water that new growth
 - Apollos taught the church more about their relationship with the Lord
 - And in that teaching, the church grew stronger in their faith
 - In both cases, Paul says God brought the growth
 - If we could be transported back in time to Corinth to watch Paul and Apollos working, we would see them putting forth great effort
 - We would hear Paul tirelessly arguing from scripture for why Jesus was Messiah
 - We could see Apollos patiently explaining the meaning of scripture for hours, emphasizing the importance of obedience
 - By all appearances, they seem to be working hard to gain a desired result
 - And that's what the Corinthian church saw too
 - But they misunderstood what they saw
 - And therefore they misunderstood the importance of these men
 - Paul says that spiritual wisdom is understanding that the results were entirely God's work
 - Paul's tireless preaching wasn't the cause for the church's emergence out of nothing

- And Apollo's patient exposition of scripture didn't produce the growth they observed
- The growth was a supernatural result accomplished by God, through the work of these servants
- So it stands to reason that had these men not come to Corinth, others would have been sent
 - Paul says that neither Paul nor Apollos were anything
 - Paul doesn't mean they are worthless or unimportant
 - He means with respect to the ultimate result, that result doesn't rest on Paul or Apollos...they are nothing in relationship to the result
 - God was responsible for the result
 - And that's how Paul ends v.7
 - God deserves all the credit
 - And we know this because Paul taught in Chapter 2 that the message of the Gospel is foolishness to natural men
 - In other words, it would be impossible for Paul or Apollos or any man to gain a positive result when preaching the Gospel were it not for God to produce a positive outcome
 - Like that courier bringing you your check...were it not for the wealth of the master, the courier would have no power to make you wealthy on his own
- This truth is powerful spiritual wisdom
 - It has the potential to completely change our understanding of the work of evangelism and of God Himself
 - Where before we may have assumed we were the ones with the power to change hearts
 - Now we understand that only God has that power
 - Where before we might have condemned ourself or others for not working hard enough to save an unbelieving friend or relative

- Now we understand that it was never dependent on us
- On the other hand, where we might have pointed to our inability to preach or speak well as an excuse not to participate in evangelizing
 - Now we know that our ability is not the key ingredient to success
- If in the past we ever hesitated to share our faith with a friend or family member because the odds of success seemed too small to warrant the effort
 - Now we know that at any moment we might find a positive response because that response lies completely in God's power
- This truth cuts both ways
 - It takes away our opportunity to boast in any success we experience in our work of Gospel ministry
 - But it also removes any excuse for not trying
 - The bad news is we have zero power to save anyone
 - The good news is God has all the power in the universe, and He's prepared to work through us according to His will
- Some have come to this truth and left with only half an understanding
 - Men have heard that God owns the outcome anytime the Gospel is presented, and so they conclude that they have no reason to get involved
 - Personal ministry loses its attraction to some when they understand that faith arrives only by God's power, not by their personal efforts
 - Like a pouting child, they refuse to serve God at all, since God doesn't need them
 - This is just another form of spiritual immaturity
 - If boasting in God's work is one form of spiritual immaturity, then discounting the importance of joining God in His work is just another

- Both views are evidence that we haven't understood the spiritual importance of advancing the Gospel
- So Paul now takes a moment to explain why we need to work hard in serving God: because there will be a test

1Cor. 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

1Cor. 3:9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

1Cor. 3:10 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.

- Paul says that the ones who plant or water are one
 - What he means is they are equal in their opportunity and importance
 - Since God drives the outcome, no man is more or less important than any other member of the body
 - We all have an equal opportunity to participate with the Lord, and therefore we all have an equal opportunity to be rewarded
 - Notice Paul raises the prospect of God rewarding us for our service at the end of v.8
 - Each worker will receive a reward according to his or her labor
 - Laboring in this context refers to serving God in His work of planting and growing the church
 - The issue isn't whether we are hard workers in general
 - In our job or at school or in our homes
 - The issue is whether we labor well in the ministry the Lord gives each of us to serve Him in the days we live on earth
- Some Christians are surprised to learn that we may earn rewards
 - To some the concept that the Father in Heaven is prepared to give us a reward seems incompatible with love or grace
 - I've heard some question whether it's proper to serve God expecting something in return

- Shouldn't we just serve Him because He's God or because He saved us?
 - Well, yes, that is reason enough
- But God is so good He's prepared to reward us for faithful service
 - The New Testament teaches about rewards repeatedly
 - For example:

[Matt. 5:11](#) "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

[Matt. 5:12](#) "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

[Luke 6:35](#) "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your **reward** will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.

[2John 8](#) Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.

- And then we have the many parables Jesus taught about slaves left to work in the master's absence
 - And then the master returns one day and evaluates the work of his slaves
 - The ones that have served faithfully will receive a reward while the unfaithful slave receives nothing

[Matt. 24:44](#) "For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

[Matt. 24:45](#) "Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time?

[Matt. 24:46](#) "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.

[Matt. 24:47](#) "Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

- Jesus says that He expects that we serve Him faithfully with what we've been given to accomplish
 - It's not our achievement He judges, it's our faithfulness to the task

- Jesus isn't asking us necessarily to build great things, achieve great things, travel great distances, influence many people
 - The goal He sets before us is faithfulness to what we've been assigned
 - And Jesus makes the assignment, since He is our Master
- Paul explains the judgment criteria the Lord will use when He tests our work
 - To help us understand the process, Paul uses the analogy of construction workers endeavoring together to construct a new building
 - In v.9 Paul says we are all the construction workers
 - And the building we are constructing is the body of Christ, the Church
 - Paul calls it God's building
 - So the first thing to understand about our coming test is that we're being tested on how well we participated in the construction project of building the Church
 - Paul means in the sense of recruiting new believers and serving them as they participate in the body
 - We can't expect reward for any kind of work we choose...it's work for the benefit of the kingdom
 - It's easy to overlook this detail, but if we miss it, we miss the whole point
 - We aren't going to be rewarded simply for hard work at our job or in our studies or in our sports or hobbies or other endeavors
 - Only if those things eventually become opportunities to advance the Kingdom will they hold the possibility for reward
 - If we prosper at work and use that income to finance Kingdom work, then we might be rewarded
 - If our studies make us a more effective teacher of God's word or prepare us to serve Christ as a doctor, etc.
 - Then reward could result
 - Ultimately, the question is whether we were faithful to the Kingdom building opportunities the Lord gave us

- Notice Paul says in v.10 that our working is according to the grace God has given to us
 - What we do in service to God is a work appointed to us by God as a matter of grace
 - It's grace to us that we even have opportunity to serve the Lord
 - So we cannot make up our own ideas of service
 - Instead, we must approach carefully the opportunities we've been handed
 - To some Christians, Jesus gives greater grace: greater opportunities to have a greater impact upon the Kingdom and the Church
 - We might think of men like the Apostle Paul, Augustine, Luther, Tyndall, Bonhoeffer, Billy Graham, and many others
 - These men were gifted with remarkable insight and skill
 - And the Lord placed them in the midst of monumental circumstances
 - So they could make tremendous impact for the Kingdom
 - Therefore, they were expected to rise to the occasion and serve the Lord accordingly...they could do no less!
 - Were they to shrink back from their appointed tasks, then they would have been considered faithless in their service
 - And they would have received a lessor reward
 - But we also know the Lord has assigned most Christians lessor gifts and opportunities (lessor in the way men judge such things)
 - For every Paul, Luther or Graham, there are ten million Christians who work in obscurity to serve their Lord
 - But as Paul said, we are all one before the Lord, equally able to please Him and earn reward
 - So the poor farmer faithfully serving the Lord working in the fields while raising his family to fear the Lord can be rewarded equally with the Apostle Paul

- The young missionary struggling to teach the Bible to a handful of believers in a remote village can earn the same praise as Luther
 - And a single Christian mother working nights to feed her children while praising Jesus for her hope of resurrection may please her Master no less than Graham
- Just as that thief crucified next to Jesus used his last hours of life to praise the Lord and to testify to another sinner concerning the truth of the Gospel
 - We each receive some measure of gift and opportunity
 - The question is, what do we make of it?
- If we can be rewarded for faithful service, then it stands to reason that we might suffer loss for faithless choices, right?
 - Paul makes this point in 2 Corinthians

2Cor. 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

- When the time comes for our service to be assessed, Paul says Christ considers all that we do in the body, whether good or bad
 - “In the body” refers to the works we accomplish in this life prior to our resurrection
 - In other words, He doesn’t just ask what did we do, He also asks what *could* we have done?
- In the time we’ve been given to serve God, Jesus will recompense (or repay) according to what we’ve done, good or bad
 - If we do good things, serving Him faithfully, then we have reason to expect a reward
 - But if we do bad things – that is we do not serve Him faithfully – then we can expect a loss of that reward
- Paul explains further in the next passage

1Cor. 3:11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

[1Cor. 3:12](#) Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

[1Cor. 3:13](#) each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

[1Cor. 3:14](#) If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

[1Cor. 3:15](#) If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

- In v.11 Paul says every good work we set out to accomplish must begin with the Gospel itself
 - The Gospel message is the foundation of every good work in the Church
 - In fact it is the foundation of the Church itself
 - If our work doesn't begin with the advancement of the Gospel, it's useless from the start
 - Social works, charity, various other good works are not the mission and purpose of the church
 - They are tools we use to support the mission
 - But the mission is the Gospel of Jesus Christ
 - So we cannot begin our work for Christ on any foundation other than on the mission to spread the testimony of Jesus and Him crucified
 - And then from there, we are in a position to earn reward
 - Then Paul says we may build in one of two ways
 - We could build on the foundation of Christ using valuable materials
 - Gold, silver, valuable jewels
 - Obviously, these materials are not your ordinary construction materials
 - They are precious and they are also durable
 - Paul compares these materials to the good works that please the Lord

- They are pleasing in that they are valuable to the Lord's purposes in building His church
- And remember the church we are building is the people, not a literal structure
- On the other hand we could build our metaphorical structure with ordinary materials like wood, hay and straw
 - These materials are of essentially no value
 - Moreover, they will not last very long
- Then in v.13, Paul describes our coming test
 - In a day to come, our work will become evident
 - The day Paul mentions is the judgment day, the day Christ assesses our life in service to Him
 - That day is the day we die and face the Lord
 - Hebrews says:

[Heb. 9:27](#) And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to **die once** and after this comes judgment,

- And in that day, Paul says our work will become evident
 - The word evident in Greek is *phaneros*, which means obvious
 - The quality of our work will be obvious to everyone, including us
 - Somehow the Lord will make it plain what we did, whether good or bad
 - All the games we play and lies we tell ourselves will end
 - And in their place will be truth
 - Because that's the purpose of every test: to reveal truth
- Paul compares this test to a fire that burns away the worthless things and leaves behind only the sturdy, valuable things
 - Fire is commonly used to test the quality of metals

- Impurities are burned away and all that remains are the pure elements
 - That's the way our work will be evaluated
- Paul says in v.14 that if our work stands up to Christ's scrutiny, we will receive a reward
 - The Lord is a righteous judge
 - And He is also a good Father Who knows how to give good gifts
 - We can expect that our reward will exceed anything we might have gained for ourselves here on earth
- But for some, that judgment will not go well
 - Paul says in v.15 that if a man comes into that moment without a proper legacy of service to Christ, then all that he brings will be burned up
 - He may have been a Christian all his life
 - Attended church a Sunday here or there
 - Prayed when he thought about it
 - Threw a few bucks in the collection plate from time to time
 - But not much else
 - Whatever he did, the test of his life reveals a wasted opportunity
 - And so the fire of Christ's judgment consumes everything the man accomplished
 - He may have built a Fortune 500 company
 - He may have a fortune in the bank
 - He may be beloved by millions
 - He may have done many great things...but they weren't things that mattered to Christ and the Kingdom
 - Paul says that man fails his test...so what happens to him?
 - Praise the Lord, the man's entrance into the Kingdom isn't at risk
 - Paul says he comes through

- He isn't left behind, he isn't shut out, sent away or rejected
 - He is saved, but he comes through like someone walking through a fire
 - They may have entered the fire clothed and holding many possessions
 - But they emerge naked and empty-handed
- We should be working today for a better outcome on that future day
 - That day is a moment we all face eventually
 - And when we face that moment, we want to receive a good result
 - This test comes but once, and we have only one lifetime to prepare
 - But the results last 1,000 years
 - Our rewards (or lack thereof) will be ours to enjoy for the thousand year Kingdom
 - Let's stimulate each other to be prepared for that day