The Servant’s Reward

1 Corinthians 3

Prayer

I want to begin today by presenting one of God’s truths that we are all aware of to one degree or another. The scriptures say:

“23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Romans 3:23.

I don’t think that I have to push that verse very hard. Any honest person must admit to being sinful. And if you don’t admit to it then you prove that you are a sinner, because you are lying to God and lying to yourself.

So, what if I told you a way that you could be blameless before God?

Mind you, this is not the way to be blameless before people. God has made a way for us to be blameless before Him, but unfortunately His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness does not make us right with others. But that subject is for another day.

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Today, I am going to quickly share with you the Way to be blameless before God. Believe in and put your faith in God’s sacrifice of His very essence (Jesus) for your sin. And believe in and put your trust in God imparting His perfect righteousness to your cosmic account so that as you live your life on earth and as you come to the end of this life He will find you blameless.

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It is that simple. And yes, it will include a desire for repentance and for living according to God’s principles. But our blamelessness comes from Jesus’ righteousness alone.

Some teachers, however, teach the basic idea that there will be Christians who are blameless and Christians who will basically be better than blameless. I believe this is a doctrine of wood, hay, and stubble. One writer correctly states:

“It is Biblically absurd to argue for additional personal rewards for the good that we do, or loss of them as Judgment for any imperfection (which is still sin), while arguing that it is not judgment for sin. It was for this reason that Christ went to the cross that we “could” appear before Him blameless, perfect, and without fault in all our works, and that we “could” appear before the bema seat and be judged according to the work of Christ. The bema seat is not to punish believers I agree, but it is not a reward anyone based on his individual righteousness (meritorious works) either, for we are all worthy of a full reward of inheritance because we are all without fault. If any of our works could be faulted as imperfect, it would constitute sin. The wages of sin is death, not the loss of rewards or diverse payments. All our punishment was paid for by Christ at the cross, and our full reward was “secured” for us by that very same work.”

I do not believe that the Bible teaches some type of value based hierarchy among believers based on their works here on earth. There may be a hierarchy while we are on earth based upon our blame before each other. But, instead every person who has put their faith in Jesus will be found equally blameless and righteous at His coming judgment.

The fullness of our reward will be found as we enjoy relationship with Christ and with those who are one in Christ with us. John 17:3, records Jesus’ who says:

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“*And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.*” (John 17:3, NLT)

Remember “eternal” doesn’t just mean everlasting, eternal also speaks to the quality of life, in other words the fullness of life.

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So what brings fullness of life in this world and in the next? I would propose that it has nothing to do with stuff like authority, honor, shame, wealth, power, or even extended access to varying universes. Fullness of life is found in rich relationship with Jesus and those who are in Him. Healthy relationships are the most rewarding thing in this life and in the next. I know that this is somewhat hard to believe because good relationships are hard to come by here and now. But, if you imagine the most connected and healthy times with your favorite people, you might agree with me that sharing life with each other is the best part of living.

Virginia Woolf once wrote:

“For pleasure has no relish unless we share it.”  
― **Virginia Woolf,**[**The Common Reader**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2684550)

And W. Clement Stone said:

“If you are really thankful, what do you do? You share.”  
― **W. Clement Stone**

I want to use this quote to consider the context of 1 Corinthians chapter 3, because I believe we tend to isolate the reward section of the verses and we miss the real message of the writer. This passage elevates togetherness and discourages comparison and somehow many commentators (and readers) turn it into “If I work hard I’m going to get more reward for myself.”

Paul was addressing division between church members on whether Paul or Apollos was the guy to follow. Which was the best.

Please, read along with me in 1 Corinthians 3, beginning with verse 1:

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“*Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn’t talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other.*

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*Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world? When one of you says, “I am a follower of Paul,” and another says, “I follow Apollos,” aren’t you acting just like people of the world? After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God’s servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us.*

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An earthly based rewards system causes policing and unhealthy comparison. Paul says it right here, trying to say one person’s work is worth more than another’s work is earthly and it comes from the sinful nature. Paul puts the exclamation mark on it by saying “who are we? We are just servants.”

This attitude echoes Jesus’ teaching as He described the attitude of a servant.

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“*…when you obey me you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.’ ”*” (Luke 17:10, NLT)

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Paul’s emphasis was on God’s glory, not on some type of accolade that made him seem superior to others. He continues…

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*I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. It’s not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What’s important is that God makes the seed grow.*

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*The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work. For we are both God’s workers. And you are God’s field…”*

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Two different jobs, the same purpose…He even makes it clear that one job isn’t more important or prestigious than the other. And He also says they will both be rewarded for their work. So what is the work? As we read on we see that Paul transitions a bit here by moving from an agricultural analogy to a construction analogy.

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*…”You are God’s building. Because of God’s grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.*

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*Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person’s work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss.*

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Let’s again consider some of the imagery.

Paul is describing Apollos and himself as builders of God’s temple.

The gospel of Jesus is the foundation.

The builders can use various types of materials.

Some materials: wood, hay, and stubble are works that will not bring lasting contributions to the building. Let me use an example. If I, as the pastor of Bonney Lake Community Church, teach you that God will guarantee that your bank account will never run out and that is why you should trust Him. And then your like, wow I want to follow a God like that. If your profession of faith is founded on that, it is faith that is founded on wood, hay, or stubble. At the judgment, I would find out that that professed believer was not truly part of God’s building.

That would bring a sense of loss to me, to stand before God and know that I led someone to anchor their faith on something other than the truth of God. This is why Paul writes:

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*The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.*

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Teachers and evangelists won’t lose salvation, but they will miss out on the reward (the reward here seems to be the enjoyment of the building (the people they worked to build with). Remember, as I said earlier, relationship and intimacy with Christ and others are the truly eternally rewarding things in this life and the life to come.

### As the, “[Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible](https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/jfb/1-corinthians-3.html#14),” says of the reward:

**reward** — *wages,* as a builder, that is, teacher. His converts built on Christ the foundation, through his faithful teaching, shall be his “crown of rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 1:14; Philemon 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:19)

A writer named Paul Ellis wrote:

Rewarded according to his labor? How does that fit in the economy of grace? In the Greek the word for reward means pay or wages. God is going to pay us like a paymaster? How does that work?

Paul says we are rewarded for our labor. What is our reward? It’s people – [spiritual children and eternal friends](https://escapetoreality.org/2015/03/19/parable-of-the-shrewd-manager/).

Think about it. What labor is more rewarding than the labor of childbirth? As in the natural, so in the spiritual. What is more fulfilling than co-laboring with the Lord to create new life? Honestly, there is nothing! Nothing compares to the thrill of new birth.

And the Apostle Paul himself wrote to the church in Thessolonica:

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“*After all, what gives us hope and joy, and what will be our proud reward and crown as we stand before our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you!*” (1 Thessalonians 2:19, NLT)

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Our eternal reward is relationship with Christ and those who are in Christ. In the heavenly kingdom community, oneness and unity in Jesus is celebrated.

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*Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?*

We are all in this together.

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There is one more kind of person that is mentioned in this passage, the destructive teacher. This isn’t someone who leads someone to trust Jesus for the wrong reasons, unknowingly. Remember that person will be saved but their addition to the building will not. Paul now mentions those who bring division and destruction to the construction process. In fact, those in Corinth who were battling over which teacher was better or worse were clearly risking destroying the possibility of bringing people into the fold. It is pretty hard for people to put their trust in Jesus if we as Christians demonstrate the same type of jealousy, dissension, and dog eat dog mentality as other organizations do. Paul writes of these people.

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*God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world’s standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise.*

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*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, “He traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness.” And again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise; he knows they are worthless.”*

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*So don’t boast about following a particular human leader. For everything belongs to you—whether Paul or Apollos or Peter, or the world, or life and death, or the present and the future. Everything belongs to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*” (1 Corinthians 3:1–23, NLT)

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As Christians we are One Team. In our culture, we have differing paychecks, and necessary value based systems. But eternal life and kingdom life, for that matter, isn’t this kind of system. We have no need to be jealous and compare our spirituality or our gifts and our work. Our reward in heaven is an eternal relationship with Christ and with all of His saints. I will relent and say that it seems there will be a moment of loss when we discover that people who we believed to be part of the Temple of God aren’t there with us, or that the doctrines we held so dear were actually wood, hay, and stubble, but that moment will not continue on for all eternity.

More than anything we look forward to rejoicing on that day when we stand before Christ and He shows us His glory in the works of sowing and watering that we participated in. And after we see it, after He says well done good and faithful servant we will enter into the gates of eternity by saying…

“We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.” John 17:3

I want to conclude by sharing a few things we can apply from 1 Corinthians 3.

#1 Don’t spend your time trying to figure out who is better or worse or more or less valuable. The world and the sinful nature are big on these kinds of comparisons. There are temporal reasons for these comparisons of blamelessness, but don’t put too much time in it.

#2 Be involved in the work of sharing your faith and building God’s Building. Close relationships are the most rewarding things on earth and in the life to come.

#3 Run the race as one who will win the prize. Paul said that anyone who has raced, knows that winners train hard and push hard and that is what this text emphasizes. Train like winners train. Jesus already assures you of the prize.

#4 Find ways to build healthy relationships with the people that you are going to spend eternity with. Cherish the good moments as evidence of the good things to come and the Spirit of God indwelling us.

#5 If you have put your faith in the works of Jesus alone, then never fear the judgment of Jesus or others. Fear of judgment cripples you from doing the work God intended for you. Jesus makes our works that are imperfect before men, perfect before God. If you are waiting until your house is perfect you will never have people over.

And finally

#6 It is of the sinful nature and of the system of the world to compare the value of what I will get and what you will get and wonder who will be better or fuller. A kingdom minded heart instead wonders about the glory that will be revealed to US. As the scriptures say:

“*…“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”*” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NLT)

I hope you are excited to enjoy that day together. That day that when we will see Him, and each other, in the perfectly glorified way we were meant to be.