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Sermon Notes

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## **God's Servants Humbled, Then Used and Rewarded**

### **1 Corinthians 3:5-9**

#### One Night in Babylon

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, was a staggeringly talented man... he was the ruler of the greatest empire the world had ever seen; he was a military genius, an amazingly gifted administrator, a shrewd judge of men, with penetrating discernment. He was able to organize lesser talented men to maximize their abilities, and through sheer willpower and fear, he galvanized the Babylonian people into a force for world domination. By his conquests, he made Babylon amazingly wealthy... gold, silver, jewels flowed into the city from all the distant corners of his mighty empire. With the wealth of his conquests, he made the City of Babylon brilliant – the walls were heightened and fortified, the houses embellished with the finest materials. His own palace was the envy of the world, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.... It was planted with trees from all over the world, and the fruit trees were lush and abundant.

One night, King Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his palace, and looked out with deep-seated pride over the city his genius had built. He was in awe of what he had done, what he had built. And he breathed in the fragrant air of his creations and spoke in self-worship: "Is this not the great Babylon I have built, for the royal residence, by my mighty power and to display my majestic glory?" He did not speak these words to anyone in particular, for he did not care at that moment what anyone else thought... he was drunk with self-worship.

But Almighty God heard what he said, and read the pride of his heart. God knew the spirit of Babylon was dominating this man's heart... it was a spirit of soaring arrogance that had led the Babylonians centuries before him to build the tower of Babel in that same place "to make a name for themselves." And it was also the spirit of self-worship that led the true King of Babylon, Satan, to seek to ascend in heaven to topple Almighty God from his throne:

*Isaiah 14:13-14 You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. <sup>14</sup> I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."*

God hates that arrogance in Satan's heart, and in human hearts. And so, he had warned Nebuchadnezzar in a dream a year before that evening walk out on the rooftop of his palace... that if he didn't repent of his pride and give God the glory for his empire, he would be struck by God and given the mind of an animal for seven years until he acknowledged that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to whomever he chooses.

Now friends, there's nothing wrong with a certain level of joy in accomplishment. God has created human beings in his image and given us remarkable brains and dexterous fingers... we can make beautiful things, even amazing things. With our skillful labors, we can build strong, soaring buildings and paint masterpiece paintings; we can compose concertos for the violin, and some of us have the skill to play those pieces. And there's nothing wrong with working hard in our tasks and feeling a certain level of joy and satisfaction in our labors:

*Ecclesiastes 2:24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God*

However, everything we put our hands to in this world is temporary, and will someday become dust in the wind... everything, that is, EXCEPT the work we do in the SPIRITUAL FIELDS of human souls, the glorious work of harvesting souls for eternity. The glorious work of building the spiritual church of Jesus Christ.

And to be qualified for this work, the highest and most glorious work there is, God's servants must to HUMBLED... truly, deeply HUMBLED... we must acknowledge from the depths of our hearts that we are merely servants who can accomplish nothing apart from Christ and apart from his Spirit

God OPPOSES the proud, but gives grace to the humble

When we are in heaven, walking on the rooftop of a dwelling in the New Jerusalem, God will not have one of his servants boasting arrogantly before him as Nebuchadnezzar did, saying **"Is this not the New Jerusalem I HAVE BUILT by my courageous missionary work in evangelism... or by my skillful teaching of the Word of God... or by my faithful prayer life... or by my lavishly generous financial contributions... or by my tireless labors behind the scenes... or by my works of mercy among the sick or poor!!"**

If God will USE YOU GREATLY he must first HUMBLE YOU GREATLY

And that is exactly what this morning's passage is written to do for the Corinthians, and then for us all

The Corinthians were CARNAL in their mindset, focusing too much on human leaders. They were divided into factions:

***1 Corinthians 1:12 One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"***

***1 Corinthians 3:3-4 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?***

The gospel trains us in a whole NEW WAY OF THINKING about human leaders... a humble way that recognizes that God alone can make his field produce a harvest, God alone can build the spiritual and eternal Church of Jesus Christ

YET though God could have worked his field alone or built his building alone, in his wisdom and grace, God chose to have his former enemies become his adopted sons and daughters and JOIN HIM IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS... to be his SERVANTS to do beneficial tasks, essential labors, that he will use and that he will reward.

But it is VITAL for all God's people to have a HUMBLED view of human power and ability, and to give God the glory

That is what 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 is all about

I. What Are Paul and Apollos? Only Servants

***1 Corinthians 3:5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.***

A. Paul Humbles Himself and Apollos

1. What are we??
2. Rhetorical question, designed to humble himself, Apollos, and really all Christians
3. For the effective power behind the church, the Corinthians were looking in the wrong place... at HUMAN BEINGS that God used to plant and develop the church

4. Some translations say “Who is Paul? Who is Apollos?”... as though we are men with no name, no reputation, nothing special

***Exodus 3:11-12 But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> And God said, "I will be with you.***

As though Moses were saying, “I’m not THE KIND OF MAN you would choose for an important mission like this. I didn’t go to prophet school or ambassador school... I’m not qualified for such a challenging mission.”

God’s answer to Moses’ question, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt” was not a direct answer to that question... he didn’t build up his ego or self-esteem saying, “You are underestimating yourself, Moses... You are EXACTLY the right man for the job!”

Instead, he said “I will be with you...”

The power for the deliverance of the Jews from physical slavery in Egypt was not going to be human... not eloquence, not clever diplomacy, not military tactical skill... just the OUTSTRETCHED ARM OF ALMIGHTY GOD!

If that was true with the Exodus, how much more true is it with the harvest of souls for Christ?!

5. But actually, I think he said “WHAT is Paul? What is Apollos?”

6. It is a much more humbling question!!

Like this:

***Psalm 8:3-4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, <sup>4</sup> what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?***

In comparison with the majesty of God in display in the heavens, the moon, the stars... David was led to ask WHAT IS MAN? WHAT am I?

That is even more true when we look at the saving work of God in Christ

“WHAT am I?” says Paul ... “What is Apollos?”

Paul answers the question

B. We are ONLY SERVANTS

***1 Corinthians 3:5 Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.***

1. Compared to Christ, we played a minor role
2. Your focus on Paul or Apollos is twisted

Imagine: You and your friends have come to a majestic palace in which a generous king has invited all of you to a lavish feast... he welcomes you all warmly, commands his servants to care for your every need, to feed you and give you whatever drink you desire... and you and your friends start arguing about which of the servants was most skillful in serving the meal or pouring the drinks

Bizarre!! Your focus should be on the rich generosity of the king whose home it is!

## II. The Lord Assigns to Each His Task

***1 Corinthians 3:5-6 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.***

- A. Both Paul and Apollos Are Servants... But With Different Roles
- B. The Lord Assigned to Each His Different Task
- C. The Goal Was the Same: The Saving Faith of the Corinthians

1. Paul says “we are each servants THROUGH WHOM YOU CAME TO BELIEVE”
2. God used human instruments to bring the Corinthians to saving faith
3. God assigned to Paul to arrive in Corinth and begin the hard work of trailblazing for Christ
4. He reasoned every Sabbath in the synagogue with the Jews there, seeking to prove from scripture that Jesus was the Christ; he expanded to the Greeks as well
5. After he left, Apollos came to Corinth

***Acts 18:24-25 a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately***

***Acts 18:28 he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ***

D. Through BOTH of them, the Corinthians CAME TO BELIEVE in Christ... but they had DIFFERENT TASKS

E. Paul Planted, Apollos Watered

***1 Corinthians 3:5-6 as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it***

1. Paul uses an agricultural image here... just as Jesus often did as well... many of Jesus' parables are agricultural
2. At the end of this passage, he makes it plain what the field is

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

3. Paul's task: Planting the seed of the word... initial evangelism, reasoning from scripture, to the end that God's elect will come to saving faith in Christ
4. Apollos's task: watering the seed already planted

The seed is covered with a hard shell that protects it until it is time for it to be planted and to grow

The farmer then waters the plant so that the hard shell of the seed will rot or dissolve and the seed can send out its first shoots into the soil, the beginning of the root system

F. Christ's Wise Division of Labor

***John 4:35-38 Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. <sup>36</sup> Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. <sup>37</sup> Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.'***

1. In the history of the Christian church and especially in missions, it is often the case that a trailblazer does long, hard initial work with very little outward results
2. It's similar to clearing a field of trees, and then PLOWING before planting

Think about the kind of work that frontier settlers did in Kentucky in the days of Daniel Boone, the 1780's and 1790's

They would migrate through the Cumberland Gap using the Wilderness Trail and settle in a certain valley, and start to clear the ground of these massive trees. They might begin by girdling the trees, which meant cutting a ring of bark completely around the trunk of the tree – 360 degrees around... this killed the tree. The next summer, the tree would produce no leaves to block the sunlight and the settlers could plant a small crop of beans on which to subsist. Then, all through the winter, they would chop down the massive hardwoods – elm, oak, ash... the hardest were the oak trees. They would use a grubbing axe and an ox team to root out the stumps. Once all the stumps were removed, they could use the ox team to plow the ground, stopping every time there was a rock in the way... The staggering amount of manual labor needed for a full harvest of wheat or corn is mind-boggling!

Jesus used a similar image with evangelism... “I sent you to reap what you have not labored for. Others have done the HARD WORK and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

During the Puritan era in England, the earliest Puritan pastors were trailblazers in what was effectively pagan England... the medieval Catholic church had not preached the true gospel or led souls to a genuine saving faith in Christ. The earliest Puritan pastors had to PLOW some TOUGH SOIL spiritually among the people

Richard Greenham was a pastor in a place called Dry Drayton, seven miles from Cambridge in the years 1570 to 1590. He worked extremely hard. He rose daily at four in the morning, and each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, preached a sermon at daybreak to catch his people before they dispersed into the fields, for they were farmers. He preached twice on Sundays, preaching with such fervor that his shirt was drenched in sweat; he catechized the children every morning, and then spent every afternoon in evangelism, walking from field to field preaching the gospel among the farmers, walking alongside them as they were plowing their fields! He was renowned as a skillful counselor of souls...

HOWEVER... J.I Packer said about him, “Yet for all his godliness, insight, evangelical message, and hard work, his ministry was VIRTUALLY FRUITLESS. There was a little rhyme that was spoken of his: **Greenham had pastures green, but flocks full lean.**” (meaning his own people were spiritually sick despite his faithful ministry)

Packer said about England at that time: “There was much fallow ground to be broken up; it was a time for plowing and sowing, but the reaping time was still in the future.”

So it is on the mission field: missionaries may work among an unreached people group for a full term... many years... and see almost no fruit; then another missionary comes and has remarkable success, leading many people to Christ

G. Christ is VERY WISE to Assign to Each His Task

1. People have different gifts, different personalities, different roles
2. This division of labor also HUMBLER all the servants, because no one person is all-competent, independent, able to do the whole thing himself

III. God Alone Gives Spiritual Growth

***1 Corinthians 3:6-7 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.***

A. Biological Growth is a Gift of God

1. The apple farmer can do all the right things, but he cannot make the seed grow into a sapling, or the sapling grow into a sturdy tree, or the tree produce buds or the buds turn into apples, or the apples grow to fullness
2. Every step of the way is worked by the secret activity of God in the plant, and the farmer cannot PRODUCE ANY OF IT

B. In the same way: ONLY GOD CAN GIVE SPIRITUAL GROWTH

***1 Corinthians 2:2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.***

***1 Corinthians 2:3-5 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.***

***1 Corinthians 2:14 ¶ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.***

1. The Spirit alone can overcome all the obstacles of a natural human heart to the gospel

C. So ALSO the Growth of a Person in the Gospel is a Spiritual Miracle

1. The Spirit works the first faith: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that he died on the cross for MY sins and rose again

2. Then, to begin to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ is also a miracle of God's grace
3. Every step of the way from spiritual immaturity to full maturity in Christ is directly worked by the Spirit in the person's heart
  - a. Certainly, faithful pastors or parents or disciplers can be INSTRUMENTS of God to deliver the pure milk and robust meat of the Word
  - b. But only God can enable to person to grow in Christ

D. The Servants Are Nothing, God is Everything

***1 Corinthians 3:7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.***

1. Here, Paul answers the question... "What am I? What is Apollos? WE ARE NOTHING!!"
2. Paul doesn't mean to insult himself or Apollos or any human being
  - a. Paul knows full well that all human beings are created in the image of God
  - b. God sent his only begotten Son into the world to die for human beings
3. But when it comes to our labor in the Lord, we are NOTHING... in other words, God's power is all that really matters
4. God can raise up from these stones apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers and servants
5. God doesn't NEED us, but graciously chooses to use us

***2 Corinthians 4:1 through God's mercy we have this ministry***

IV. The Servants are One, and Each Will Be Rewarded for their Labor

***1 Corinthians 3:8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.***

- A. Paul says he and Apollos are "ONE"
1. A strong assertion of their unity
  2. They are part of the same BODY, as he will say later... different roles, different functions, but the same body with Christ the head
  3. Or perhaps, ONE IN PURPOSE: "Apollos and I have the same ultimate goal and we serve the same glorious Lord!"

## B. Especially... We are Not Adversaries or in Competition with Each Other

1. The factions were saying "I follow Paul AND NOT Apollos"... "Oh, yeah??!! Well I follow Apollos, AND NOT PAUL!!"
2. But that is foolish!

Picture two laborers out in an apple orchard: one man in planting apple saplings in a neat row, another man is watering them behind him. They are both wearing the same uniform bearing the logo of the orchard. No one would see them in competition! They have ONE PURPOSE... a harvest of delicious apples in the future.

## C. Rewards

***1 Corinthians 3:8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.***

1. God assigns to each his task, and demands that each be faithful
2. If we are faithful to that task, we will be rewarded on Judgment Day... according to OUR OWN labor... what is appropriate to the level of sacrifice and suffering and effort and faithfulness
3. The rewards are SHEER GRACE on God's part, and we will talk more about them next time
4. But they come down to this:

***Matthew 25:21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'***

## V. Applications

### A. To All Hardworking Servants of God: Let This Passage HUMBLE You

1. God is not trying to insult us, but to humble us, lest we be arrogant like Nebuchadnezzar
2. Someday, we will indeed stand and look out over a vast, glorious city, the New Jerusalem, the capital city of the Empire of Christ
3. None of us will be boasting at that time in our own efforts at helping to build that city
4. God wants us NOW to realize to him alone belongs the glory for the spread of the gospel and the growth of each Christian into maturity

B. However, Let Us Celebrate the Grace and Kindness of God in INVOLVING US in this work!

1. God doesn't need us, but he does call us into his service
2. He can fill us with his Spirit and put us to specific tasks that he will use to lead others to faith and build them up to maturity
3. Your sacrificial service in that ministry will be the greatest work of your lives

C. To Christians Who Are Not Yet Laboring Hard for the Kingdom

1. Let Paul and Apollos INSPIRE you and CONVICT you
2. They were faithful servants, laboring in some very hard fields, and we have taken up their task
3. We must not be lazy or cowardly in our generation... this is OUR TIME TO SERVE

D. Look Forward to the Rewards (more next week)

E. To Non-Christians... COME TO CHRIST!!