Our Service Before the Lord

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In their carnal mindset, the Corinthians had caused factions and divisions in the local church in Corinth. Characterized by envy and strife, they had misused some servants in the Lord's work for their own purposes. Some made Paul, others Apollos or Cephas (Peter), and the very devout even made the Lord Jesus Himself their party leader. None of them were aware that they were thereby attacking the position of the Lord Jesus and acting in blatant contradiction to the body of Christ.

By addressing the state of the Corinthians in his first letter, Paul addresses precisely those workers in the Lord's work whose position the Corinthians wanted to claim for themselves. **Despite the particular context, we want to pick out a few points and apply them generally to us as workers in the Lord's work:**

1. ## The Laborer is a Servant (*1 Cor. 3:5a*)

Paul asks: *"Who then is Apollos, and who is Paul?",* and immediately answers: *"Servants through whom you believed"* (*1 Cor. 3:5*). We often speak of the "work of the Lord." It is His work – the work of the Lord Jesus. He is the Lord and everything is done in dependence on Him, as He wills. All others who allow themselves to be used in the Lord's work are servants (or ministers). First and foremost a *"servant of Christ"* (*1 Cor. 4:1*; cf. *Phil. 1:1*; *Rom. 15:16*; *1 Tim. 4:6*). But then also a servant of men. If we now have the position of a servant, then we should also have the attitude of a servant. In this we may follow the Lord Jesus, who, although Lord of all, was in the midst of the disciples *"as one who serves"* (*Luke 22:24-27*).

2. Servants have received different Qualifications and therefore also a different Ministry (*1 Cor. 3:5b*)

Servants carry out their ministry *"as the Lord has given to each one."* Paul and Apollos were both servants of the same Lord. They had received their qualifications from Him and had been called by Him. Nevertheless, they had different qualifications and different ministries. Paul had *"planted"* in relation to the Corinthians. Through his preaching, the Corinthians had come to saving faith. Apollos, on the other hand, had *"watered,"* i.e. given the young believers the right nourishment they needed to grow in faith. Paul did not behave like Apollos, and Apollos did not behave like Paul. They behaved *"as the Lord has given to each one."*

We can learn the following from this:

- Each servant has a different aptitude and therefore different tasks (though they will be similar).
- This applies not only to Paul or Apollos, but to *"everyone."* Everyone has been given spiritual qualifications (gifts, talents) and tasks.

- It is the Lord who gives these qualifications and tasks. He does this according to His sovereign grace, as He deems good and right. In the work of the Lord, it is not for any servant to simply take a task that suits him, nor may anyone presume to simply assign a task to someone else.
- The Lord used Paul and Apollos (and others). Even today, a “one-man-show” is not according to God's thoughts. It is not only beautiful but downright necessary for brothers to work together. What would “planting” be without “watering”?

3. It is not the Servant as a tool that is important, but God (*1 Cor. 3:6, 7*)

In a toolbox, there are different tools for different tasks. But none of these tools can fulfill a task in itself. The power is not in the tool, but in the arm of the skillful craftsman who uses the tool. What applies to the natural also applies to the spiritual: God uses various “tools” for His spiritual purposes. But these “tools” have no power in themselves, can achieve nothing in themselves. Paul had planted, Apollos watered, *“but God gave the growth”* (*1 Cor. 3:6*). It is the same today. This makes us humble and protects us from imagining things. At the same time, we may come to the One who wants to give all the strength for every spiritual task.

4. Everyone receives his own Reward (*1 Cor. 3:8*)

Even if our language should be: *“We are unprofitable servants; we have done what was our duty to do”* (*Luke 17:10*), God's Word nevertheless introduces us to the idea of reward in several places. The Lord Himself connects His coming with a reward: *“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to everyone according to his work”* (*Rev. 22:12*). Even though there are many servants in the Lord's work, each one will receive *“his own reward according to his own labor”* (*1 Cor.*

3:8). Before the judgment seat of Christ, everyone will receive the reward for what they have personally done in the Lord's work. The basis of the Lord's evaluation will not be the apparent greatness of our service (whichever way you want to determine it), but the faithfulness with which we have carried out the tasks received from the Lord.

5. All Grace (*1 Cor. 3:10*)

Paul was a servant who lived in the constant awareness of God's experienced grace. This was true not only in relation to his salvation (*1 Tim. 1:14*), but also in relation to his ministry. Whatever he had become, whatever he had received spiritually – he knew that it was by the grace of God (*1 Cor. 15:10*). But it was precisely this experienced grace that now motivated him to engage in the Lord's work. When the Lord Jesus gives gifts (spiritual empowerments), it is always by grace. Paul was aware of this. He also knew only too well that this grace alone could give him the strength he needed for his ministry, even when he was weak. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness"* (*2 Cor.12:9*), that was the Lord's promise to Paul. It applied in particular to Paul at that time, but it also applies in general to every servant today. In the awareness of experienced grace, Paul, as a *"wise master builder,"* had laid the foundation for the assembly in Corinth (*1 Cor. 3:10a*).

6. There is only one Foundation on which we can build (*1 Cor. 3:10, 11*)

When the apostle Paul came to Corinth, he had not preached *"with excellence of speech or of wisdom,"* but Jesus Christ *"and Him crucified"* (*1 Cor. 2:1-2*). That was the foundation he had laid as a *"wise master builder,"* and Paul makes it clear once again that there can be no other than Jesus Christ (*1 Cor. 3:10, 11*). It is no different

today. No concepts, plans, and strategies are needed to build a church. No, Christ and the Word of God must be preached! And when people then repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, they are added to the *"building of God."*

7. Every Worker is responsible for how he builds (*1 Cor. 3:12-15*)

Paul had laid the foundation. He had preached *"Jesus Christ, and Him crucified"* in Corinth. This had brought the church in Corinth into being. But the work was not done. Other servants would literally build on his ministry and continue to lead the young church in the faith by teaching them, providing pastoral care, or protecting them from outside dangers.

We must make an important distinction at this point: On the one hand, the Lord Jesus is the master builder and at the same time the rock on which it is built (cf. *Matt. 16:18*). The material with which He builds are *"living stones"* (i.e. believers; *1 Pet. 2:5*). Everything happens in perfection, just as God has planned in His counsel. In *1 Corinthians 3*, however, it is obviously about people building. Paul had laid the foundation – Christ – and others would build on it. Building happens in practice through the proclamation of the Word of God by the servants of God who are responsible to Him for it. Unfortunately, it can still happen that building is done wrongly or even destructively.

This is a serious matter for everyone involved in building the house of God. It does matter how we build. Everything may look beautiful and successful from a human point of view, but Paul makes it clear that the materials with which we have built will one day be revealed: Gold, silver, precious stones or wood, hay, straw. We can ask ourselves the questions: Is the Word of God being preached or human wisdom? Are the listeners occupied with spiritual things or amused with carnal things?

It is a privilege that the Lord Jesus wants to use us as servants for His purposes. **But His work must not only be done in His mind, but also in His way.**

Source https://thebiblestudy.site/article/our-service-before-the-lord/