

Feeling Responsible? God of Results – 1Corinthians 3:6

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:3-8

Introduction

Everyone wants to be successful – I think that’s a safe statement; don’t you?

I doubt there is anyone who actually sets out to fail in any endeavor they undertake

That’s especially true when it comes to our Christian walk and service; we want to be successful

And I believe it’s safe to say we all want to hear the words, “Well done” when we stand before the Lord one day

But we have a couple of problems when it comes to seeking success

First, we have a problem with defining what it means to be successful

We tend to fall into the world’s pattern of thinking where bigger is better and more is, well, more is more

And then we have a problem determining what we contribute to the effort – that is to say, what we’re responsible for

When things go well we feel good about ourselves and when things don’t go so well we can feel like failures

And we can begin to make comparisons as to whom we believe is most successful

That was the problem that existed in Corinth when Paul wrote the letter we know as 1Corinthians

The believers there were thinking carnally or according to the flesh and judging success the way the world around them did – and, frankly, the way we’re all prone to do

Therefore, some of the people viewed Paul as the most successful and best person to follow and others gave those accolades to Apollos

And their judgments led to strife and jealousy and caused division in the church

So Paul addressed the matter in 1Corinthians 3 where we will be focusing our attention this morning

What Paul has to say here directly concerns himself and Apollos but it also applies to all believers everywhere

If you look down toward the bottom of the first inside page of your bulletin you will see the following statement:

“Ministers of Brick Church: All our members” and then the names of various people how hold different offices within the church

That first statement is meant to serve as a reminder that all Christians without exception are in the ministry

We are making clear when we use the term “minister” around here that we aren’t talking about just the pastor or even the pastor and the elders, deacons, and deaconesses and so forth but every believer who calls Brick Church home

God expects each and every believer to have a function or purpose in ministry that they are engaged in

If you haven’t already done so, please open your Bible to 1Corinthians 3 (953) and follow along as I read through our passage in its entirety so we can get the lay of the land so to speak [**1Cor 3:1-9**]

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

As you can see, Paul rebukes the Corinthian believers for what they are doing and then turns to correction in verse 5

And the first thing Paul makes clear is that **we are only servants**

I. We are only servants

Paul begins by asking a rhetorical question which he then promptly answers in verse 5 [**1Cor 3:5**]

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

In order to begin healing the divisions within the Corinthian church Paul starts by correcting the wrong idea the believers there had about these two leaders

The members of the church had begun to idolize Paul and Apollos – or at least they had fallen into a sort of hero-worship so Paul hastened to point out that he and Apollos were nothing more than servants using the word *diakonos* from which we get our English “deacon” which is basically a servant that serves the church

Paul often referred to himself as *diakonos* to show that he understood he was a servant of Christ

And he even referred to Jesus as *diakonos* or “servant” in Romans 15:8 and as *doulos* which is better understood as “slave” in Philippians 2:7 to show the voluntary status he assumed during his earthly ministry

Servanthood is a very large aspect of Christianity as we seek to imitate our Savior who **Mark 10:45** says did not come *“to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”*

Then Paul says further that the Lord has given the two of them specific assignments to carry out

By definition, servants go where they are told to go and they do what they are told to do – there is very little autonomy connected with servanthood one simply gets to choose whether to be a good or a bad servant

And since Paul and Apollos were diligent to follow the marching orders that the Lord had given each of them, the Corinthian believers were saved and guided on the path to spiritual maturity through their obedience

Looking at the first part of verse 6 [1Cor 3:6a] we see that Paul says *“I planted, Apollos watered”*

Paul and Apollos had different jobs – different assignments from the Lord

Paul was always a planter in that he went to new areas to start churches – and he founded the church in Corinth

But then Apollos came along and assumed the role of pastor of the Corinthian church and “watered” or nurtured the believers there so that they could mature

In **Romans 15:19-20** Paul declares that it was his ambition to go to new places to preach Christ and to not build on someone else’s foundation and that in doing so he had fulfilled the assignment he had been given

And I believe Apollos would have said something similar about his position in ministry as his was clearly to nurture

And the same is true for us; the Lord gives us our assignments – he places us in the situations and positions he chooses for each of us

So there really is absolutely no sense in being jealous of their position or being dissatisfied with our position or really any of the competition that surrounds the different assignments we’re given because every believer is a servant

Our respective assignments are gifts from God and have no bearing on our fundamental value to God or worth in God’s plan but are merely various forms of essential tasks that we need to faithfully carry out

Theologian D.A. Carson puts it this way:

“If the Lord Jesus himself has assigned each to his task, it is idiotic to rank them according to their jobs. These servants have not gained their status by ambition and natural gift (as if in God’s world there can be any gift that he himself has not given), but by the specific assignment of the Lord.”

In that statement we see another reality that we need to acknowledge: the fact that **the Lord not only gives us our assignments but he also gives us the ability** to do everything he gives us to do

Look with me again at Romans 12:3-8 which we heard as our Scripture reading this morning

In **Romans 12:3** we see that it is God who gives us our “measure of faith”

And in verses 6-8 we see a variety of representative gifts that all come from God for us to use in ministry:

Prophecy, Service, Teaching, Exhorting, Giving, Leading, and Mercy – all with the intention that they will be used by the receiver – not for his or her own glory but for the benefit of others

But the point we need to be sure not to miss is that, again, these gifts have nothing to do with the value or worth of the receiver

They are gifts given according to God’s grace to us [**Romans 12:6**] so to compare them is, at the most fundamental level, to challenge God’s fairness and goodness toward us

And Peter reveals another gift in 1Peter 4:10-11 where he says again that all gifts are from God and to be used in ministry but he goes further in verse 11 [**1Peter 4:11**] when he points out that even the ability or “strength” to use the gifts is supplied by God

When we take all of that into consideration it becomes very difficult for any Christ-follower to either balk or boast in their service

As servants of the Lord he provides us with our assignments along with the tools and strength to carry them out and he expects us to do so because **our labor is necessary**

II. Our labor is necessary

Now, when I say our labor is necessary I don’t mean to imply that God could not fulfill his purposes without our help – as we saw last week God doesn’t need us to do anything

But, even though God could do otherwise, he has chosen to use us to fulfill his purposes

This is plainly evident throughout Scripture

In Matthew 5 believers are referred to as salt and light meaning that we are to be an example and be active in the world

Ephesians 2:10 tells us that God has prepared works for us to do

Matthew 28:18-20 tells us to “make disciples” and mentions the specific acts of baptizing and teaching that his followers are to carry out

And Paul tells his readers in Philippi to put forth effort toward realizing the fruit of sanctification in **Philippians 2:12**

And we could go on to list many more instances where we are commanded to be active in working

But the point is that God didn’t save us to have us sit on the sidelines and watch him work, he saved us to serve and he chooses to do the things he does through our labors

So when Paul says he planted and Apollos watered those were necessary tasks that they each carried out because God has chosen to use his people to win others and then to disciple them

Paul and Apollos deserve credit for their faithfulness and diligence as do all who serve faithfully and diligently

And it’s proper to give faithful and diligent servants honor and esteem as long as we honor them for being servants and not for the results of their service

Because, as Paul points out next, it’s **God who determines the results of our labors**

III. But God determines the results

Look again at verse 6 and continuing on to verse 7 [**1Cor 3:6-7**]

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

The agricultural metaphor Paul uses here is quite appropriate because every farmer and gardener knows that someone must plant the seeds and someone must water and tend the seeds if there is going to be a harvest

But every farmer and gardener also knows their influence on whether or not the seed sprouts or whether the plant matures is largely out of their hands

Actually, if you read scientific articles about seed germination and plant growth you will read a great deal about what scientists can observe in the process but nothing about how exactly the process works or why

You will likely read about moisture and temperature and air and light and good seed-to-soil contact and so forth and how all the conditions have to be right for a particular type of seed to germinate and grow

But you'll also come up against statements like: "During the interim phase the seed activates its internal physiology, respire, and begins to make proteins and metabolize its stores of food"

In other words, science doesn't exactly know how or why a seed does what it does; science only knows that it does it. Trust me, if all that was required to have a bumper crop was planting, feeding, watering, and a little weeding; I'd be a more successful gardener

But the reality is you and I don't have the ability to make a plant burst forth from a seed and grow to maturity – only God can do that

All we can do is do our part the best way we know how according to our ability and trust God for the growth

That's true in agriculture and it's true in the spiritual realm – or what Paul refers to as "God's field"

Again, it was necessary that Paul plant and it was necessary that Apollos watered because God set it up that way in Corinth and they were faithful to do their parts

And God is still depending on his church to do the work of planting and watering – the work of ministry – through which he gives the growth

But Paul says that when you compare what he and Apollos did to God's part in the process their efforts fade to the point of insignificance

Compared to God, Paul and Apollos were nothing because no matter how talented or gifted or faithful or diligent they were in carrying out their respective parts; only God could make their efforts profitable or "give the growth" as Paul says

Again, the same is true of every believer in every time and place so it is also true of us

We, as faithful servants, are expected to diligently be about the assignments we have been given – and we should obviously do everything we can to facilitate success in our efforts

But, in the end it's up to God to make our efforts pay off – God and God alone is responsible for the results

So, what does all that mean?

It means that feeling proud in ministry is foolish because it's God who gave you whatever abilities you have and God who gave you your assignment and God who determined the amount of success your efforts would produce

We are coming up on the Easter season so picture when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and all the people were cheering and spreading their cloaks and leafy branches on the road ahead of him

Now imagine the donkey he was riding thinking that all the hoopla and accolades were for her

That's a ridiculous image isn't it?

Just about as ridiculous as a servant of God taking credit for the increase that God brings about through their efforts

But it's equally ridiculous to accept the blame and to feel like a failure when the growth is slow in coming, minimal, or non-existent

As long as we are careful to labor well; we are not to blame for a lack of growth

We need only look to the prophet Jeremiah who lived and ministered during the final days of the failing nation of Judah

God sent Jeremiah to the people of Judah to give them one final warning before he cast them out of the land and Jeremiah ministered faithfully for 40 years without having any apparent success

Certainly he had no success whatsoever in changing the hearts and minds of the people – they were too desensitized by sin, too stubborn, and too idolatrous for the warnings of Jeremiah to have any positive effect

Imagine 40 years of beating your head against a brick wall but Jeremiah remained faithful – Oh, he got a bit wobbly for a time which is sort of understandable but in the end he persevered in spite of seeing only apparent failure

But God was doing a work that Jeremiah didn't understand and his ministry bore the fruit God intended by increasing Judah's wickedness and sealing their fate

Now consider Jonah who was a very reluctant prophet sent by God to preach to the Ninevites

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh and he wasn't thrilled about the message God gave him to preach and it's recorded that he reluctantly did the minimum for the three days it took him to traverse the city

And God used his ministry to cause the Ninevites from the king on down to the lowest person to repent so that God spared them from his planned destruction

Again, God gave the growth – God determines the type of harvest our efforts will produce and the size of the harvest and all his servants need to do is demonstrate faithfulness in completing their assignments

Continuing on, we see that God is also responsible for rewarding our service

In verse 8 [1Cor 3:8] Paul begins by saying that the servants of God are the same in stature before God and that no task is greater than another – they are "one"

This again tells us to not be envious over someone else's assignment or to rank the value of the various assignments because they are all equally necessary

And then he says that *"each [servant] will receive his wages according to his labor"*

That doesn't mean according to the assignment given but, rather, the diligence and faithfulness demonstrated by the servant in undertaking their assignment whatever form it might take

And we can rest assured that our reward will be based on the quality of our labor not on its success

Paul's next statement in verse 9 [1Cor 3:9] is a bit unclear and can be taken in two different ways

Paul says: *"For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building."*

The second part is clear enough but what exactly Paul means by "we are God's fellow workers" is debatable

He either means it in the sense that we are co-laborers with God or he means that he and Apollos (and all believers by extension) work in conjunction and harmony with one another – the planter is fellow laborer with the one who waters

I don't know which one Paul had in mind when he wrote those words but I really don't see the need to choose one over the other because both can be true

God has chosen for reasons of his own to partner with his children in the ministry of the gospel

That's a true statement even though, as we have seen, God's part of the partnership is the only truly vital one

And God expects his servants to work together – to be unified and complementary in their various labors because all God's assignments are equally valuable and necessary and handed out according to God's grace

What I think is far more important to recognize is Paul's focus on God in this passage

Serving God is about God and not the servant

Three times he emphasizes that the labor is God's – **God's** fellow workers; **God's** field; **God's** building

In doing so, Paul says, in effect "Stop thinking about yourself and focus on God because all of this is about God"

Pastor Rick **Warren** got at least this one thing right in his best-selling book The Purpose Driven Life – "It's not about you"

Conclusion

Let me ask you, do you acknowledge that you, as a believer, are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ?

That's an important question because as soon as you admit that you are a servant you also acknowledge that the Lord has an assignment for you and he expects you to be laboring diligently in that role

It would be unnatural for a servant not to be working

Another way of putting that is that a member of the Body of Christ without a ministry is a mystery

As a believer you have work to do and your work for the Lord is necessary no matter what form it might take

That means there are no roles that are more important than others and understanding that means all of God's servants will work in cooperation rather than be in competition

Faithful servants should be recognized, encouraged, and appreciated for their service but no servant should be glorified because in the end they are only the servant and all glory belongs to God alone

Likewise, the servant should find no cause for boasting about their accomplishments because God gives the assignments and all that is needed to carry them out and God determines the rate of success

Rather than boasting our attitude must be that as the Lord instructed his servants to have in **Luke 17:10** where he said:

So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

Likewise there should be no cause for depression or depreciation when the growth we expect doesn't come

God calls many of his children to labor long and hard without apparent "success" but growth is God's domain

All we are called to do is to be faithful in our service while trusting God with the results

Frankly, we don't see well enough, far enough, or deeply enough to know the usefulness of our labors but God does and the requisite reward from him for faithful service is certain

As we close, let's look at one more passage that we sort of touched on earlier

Turn with me to 1Peter 4 where we will read verses 10-11 [**1Peter 4:10-11**]

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Remember, a member without a ministry is a mystery

You are God's servant and God has an assignment for you to fulfill

The only question is will you do it

So, fellow servants, will you make it a priority to serve well without considering your prestige or success that God might be glorified?

Let's pray