

1 Cor 3:5–9 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God’s coworkers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

Good morning and welcome. We’re continuing our series “His Workmanship”—unpacking various passages in the NT that tell us what God has made us in Christ. We’ve talked about being his useful works of art from Eph 2:10; His sheep from Ps 23; the reconciled of God 2 Cor 5; Last week Pastor Ryan talked to us about being His Assembly—as a church God has called us to embody the Christian faith in community and gathering. And this week, we’re looking at being the co-laborers and coworkers of God.

Everyone has probably had an experience of having good, industrious coworkers; and also the experience of having lazy, unmotivated, and unproductive coworkers. When I lived in Minneapolis I got a night shift job at a huge, massive health club. It had multiple basketball courts, multiple dance classes with hardwood floors, and one of my jobs was to assist in mopping those floors. I worked with a guy who was hired same time as me and who was the laziest Gen-exer I had ever worked with. We were locked in overnight until the magnetic doors opened in the morning at 5am. And this guy would go missing every night. Couldn’t find him. One night I finished mopping all the floors in that place, and I found at about 2am in the morning sleeping in a dark corner of the building. I found his hiding spot. I started hollering at him and he came out of a dead sleep, he levitated off that bench like the dead being raised at the trumpet call of God. He quit the next week.

By contrast I worked at a church as the Worship pastor in North Spokane. The pastor that I served with was the most driven, hardworking guy I had ever worked with. Into the office first, and left the office last every day. I remember he was telling me one day of how blessed he was that I was such a hard worker. And I said to him, “Compared to you I always thought I was a slacker. Honestly, it’s been a privilege to work alongside someone who is so dedicated and industrious.”

Having lazy, do-nothing coworkers can be (at least for an American) one of the most demoralizing experiences. But working alongside of people who get up and get after it can be one of the most rewarding experiences as well.

What’s interesting about this passage in Corinthians passage is that Paul calls us—leaders and the church, God’s coworkers, his co-laborers. This is the Greek word **συνεργός (synergos)** from where we get the word “synergy” or synergistic. It means “one who works together; a helper or fellow-laborer.” Now, most of the time Paul uses this term to refer to fellow Christian coworkers in the gospel such as Priscilla and Aquila, Timothy, Epaphroditus etc. But here he uses it of us as *God’s co-laborers*.

Big Idea: In the work of the Gospel God will not do what he’s charged us to do; and we cannot do what only God can do.

The first thing we learn through this Corinthian passage is...

1. God’s goal for us is to become spiritually mature through intentional effort.

1 Cor 3:1-4 For my part, brothers and sisters, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it. **In fact, you are still not ready,** ³ because you are still worldly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not worldly and behaving like mere humans? ⁴ For whenever someone says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not acting like mere humans?

The Corinthians are suffering under the illusion that they are super-spiritual because of spectacular spiritual gifts.

Illus. When my kids were little they had to be fed all the time. One of the funnest things about having little kids is to plop some spaghetti or oatmeal or a birthday cake in the high-table tray of an 8 month old, and watch them just get noodles and sauce up their nose, birthday cake in their ears. The less mature a person is the more dependent they are on being fed.

But there comes a time when the baby has to begin to feed themselves, and begin to eat more solid food.

The author of Hebrews states, Heb 6:1–3 “Therefore, let us leave the elementary teaching about Christ and go on to maturity...”

To the Philippians Paul says to the Philippians 1:9 “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,”

But Paul tells the Corinthians they are still not ready.

What makes a person ready to move on to the mature things in Christ?

He tells the Corinthians in context that we must rid our lives of worldly thinking which produces envy, jealousy, factions and strife.

Tribalism—which is the constant aligning ourselves ***with***, and identifying ourselves ***after*** any “tribe” that isn’t of Christ; that espouses unchristian or unbiblical values and doctrines.

This is why the instruction of God’s Word is so vital. Listen, a man may not embrace Christ as his master and discipler—but just because he is unwilling to yield to Christ as his master does not mean he is without a master. We can’t serve God and money; you can serve God with money; but if don’t serve God you will serve money—or something else. Because the world and its systems are constantly trying to disciple me into their way of thinking.

And the various worldviews of this culture are guilty of thievery—because they steal, kill, and destroy our heritage of faith.

The Philosophical naturalist worldview robs me of a genuine spiritual experience with God in Christ. To tell me that I am nothing more than matter in motion; to convince me to deny what is self-evidently true about my life—I am a soul who lives in a body. A person, not just a complex arrangement of material stuff and the firing of chemicals—and as a soul who possesses a spiritual faculty, a capacity to be redeemed in Christ, to know my God and

walk with him—the atheist worldview would rob me of that. It also excuses horrific things. If you think a human being is not a being, but a blob, then you can justify horrendous things.

The Victimhood worldview (a direct descendent of the naturalist-atheist worldview)—would have me identify with some disenfranchised tribe as a perpetual and virtuous victim. But God says that I am the transgressor, I am the sinner, regardless of what was done to me—I stand guilty before a holy God and am in need of his forgiveness; clemency; justification. This would rob me of the truth of God in Christ—there is forgiveness for the worst sinner.

The Radical individualist worldview tells me that my chief Goal is the pursuit of my happiness and pleasure and a sense of self-fulfillment. But the Gospel tells me that my chief aim is to love God and others even if that act of love is at my own expense—that my *love for God would have no rival and no equal. That my love for others would be formed after Jesus's death for me on a cross.*

You see the world will disciple you to believe things that are false about you. The result is to steal your identity in Christ. To rob you of the fullest possible life in Jesus.

And in order to push back against that worldliness that keeps us immature and stalled out, it takes holy effort. It takes sanctified and vigorous determination not to be disciplined by the worldly, carnal, system of this world.

This is How Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it,
Charles Haddon Spurgeon— “A man gets just enough of religion to make him miserable. He cannot be satisfied now with the world, and he is not satisfied with God; so he is miserable all round. Oh, that you had, not only religion enough to make you a miserable sinner, but enough to make you a rejoicing saint!

But if we neglect to search the Word, and neglect private prayer, and neglect the assemblies of God's house, if we restrict and deny ourselves communion with the Most High, can we wonder if we do not grow? God will build our spiritual house undoubtedly, but we also must labour in it, there must be an earnestness, a prayerfulness, a watchfulness, an intensity of desire, a using of all appointed means by which we may be built up in our most holy faith.”

God's aim is that we grow up in the faith: leaving the immaturity and carnality—not being conformed to the world's pattern of thinking or living; but being transformed by the renewing of our minds—and this is God who works in me to will and to do his good pleasure—and this requires that I must work out what Christ has worked in.

2. God has ordained leaders to carry out his work in the church.

Now, the Corinthians have mistaken the purpose of Christian leadership. In Corinth public honor was social currency. And public shame was to be avoided at all costs. Their culture of public rhetors—professional speakers who would line the streets surrounded by their aficionados and fans, a really good rhetor could shred an amateur speaker to ribbons in public. So people’s allegiances were constantly shifting to their favorite public speakers. The public speaker’s honor and fame was transferred to the disciples. They’ve done the same with their Christian teachers...

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So, he has to correct their misgivings about what Christian leaders are...

- Leaders are servants not superstars. v. 5a, 7 “They are servants through whom you believed.” He asks, “What is Apollos, or Paul, or Peter? Each of us have a role to play. He uses a farming metaphor here. They are servants, and servants—the slave class—in Corinth were not esteemed.
- Leaders have a variety of roles to play. v. 5b “and each has the role...” So each has his own role to play. Not every leader has the same strengths or gifts or the same calling. Paul did the laborious work of tilling and planting; Apollos led the backbreaking effort to run an irrigation system to that field to keep it well-watered. And whoever was tasked to manure the field for sure got the short end of the stick.

Illus. Growing up playing various sports (Basketball, Baseball, Football)—it becomes clear just how important the team is, and how critical it is for everyone to do their job. When touchdowns are made, the QB and the receivers are usually given credit. But no winning passes can be thrown if the Linemen are not doing their jobs. When a basketball is dunked, everyone praises the high-flying abilities of the individual, but no winning shots can be taken unless point guards, power forwards and centers are all doing their respective jobs. Reaping the harvest—the project of new creation—is a team sport. And it takes a diversity of gifts, abilities: ***each one has a different role to play.***

- Leaders are appointed v.5c. ***“Each one has the role THE LORD has given.”*** Jesus called God “The Lord of the harvest.” Here’s what he said, “The harvest is ripe—that is—ready to be reaped; but the workers are few. In other words, there’s more work than there are workers. So pray to the LORD of the harvest for workers.

Illus. All of us have heard the stories of America’s “Great Resignation.” The bureau of labor statistics reports record labor shortages. More work to do than ever, yet fewer people to do it. For the last year people have been quitting their jobs, opting for early retirement. In recent article, Forbes magazine reported on the “Anti-Work” movement—this is a growing group of about 1 million people who’ve expressed their desire to quote, “Have the American Dream without the work.”

God made human beings to observe the Sabbath—which is one day out of 7 that is devoted to rest, recreation, play, recharging our batteries.

And life works best if you obey the sabbath principle. But we live a culture where some people want to reverse the sabbath principle—they want seven days of sabbath and one day of work. This is why the Bible repeated refers to discipleship as “work.” Or “labor.”

A life of perpetual “rest” and leisure leads to health problems and mental wellness issues.

And we are to pray to the Lord of the Harvest—to send forth laborers to work the fields and build the church.

- Leaders are one. v. 8 “He who plants and he who waters are one.” We strive and work toward the same goal, by the same Spirit, with the same Gospel.

What unites us? It's the gospel of Jesus. The good news of God's Kingdom salvation.

2 Cor 11:4 “For if a person comes and preaches another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or you receive a different spirit, which you had not received, or a different gospel, which you had not accepted, you put up with it splendidly.”

Gal 1:6 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”

Leaders are unified by the same message and the same mission.

Phil 1:27-28 “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel” (NIV).

3. Christian leaders are united by the same goal—to reap the harvest and build up the church.

⁹For we are God’s coworkers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”

Now, there are lots of responsibilities God doesn’t share with us. At a very high level, God is responsible for things that I’m not. But God has chosen to share his mission with leaders and the church.

So now, I used to think Paul was haphazardly mixing his metaphors here. A bit of sanctified randomness. But I don’t think that’s true. NT preachers or authors use both metaphors to refer to conversion and edification, or the building up of the body.

So this idea of working the field or the ground comes right out of Genesis 2.

On the third day: Genesis 1:12 “The earth produced vegetation: seed-bearing plants according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds.”

Now, Genesis 2:4ff. describes the third day as *not bearing seeds or shrubs or plants*: “These are the records of the heavens and the earth, concerning their creation. At the time that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ no shrub of the field had yet grown on the land, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not made it rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground.”

God designed the man to work before the fall. You see work, toil, labor, is not a curse after Man fell into sin—they are given work before they sin. The curse is that they will now work without the Spirit of God’s presence to energize and enable them.

As God’s co-workers, we have been charged with working the fields. Tilling the ground, removing the stones, manuring the plants and the backbreaking work of irrigating that seed. But we do that now in the power of the Spirit. Enabled by God to God’s work.

Morgan Freeman reading my dissertation to me.

Analogy: Ever since the fall, mankind has been seeking ways to invent machinery to help him do his work with greater ease and efficiency. Scholars study the lost technologies of the craftsmen, slaves and artisans who build the pyramids—discovering mind-boggling technologies.

Modern man creates forklifts, conveyor belts, and all kinds of things to make our work less taxing. The work must be done, but some work can be done empowered by mechanical technologies so that our labor is less stressful and taxing.

In the Christian faith, a renaissance of labor has taken place. Jesus told the Pharisees you travel or land and sea to make a single pitiful convert. But when the Holy Spirit is poured out in Acts, the Gospel goes forward into the world with relative ease. Sure it’s dangerous business to challenge people’s idols; sure it takes relentless effort to till and sow and reap—but the Spirit empowers us for this effort making us God’s co-laborers.

Questions:

1. When you think of being God's "coworker" what do you think of? What images come to mind?
 - What "effort" is God requiring of us: to live conformed to his Word vs. conformed to the world's system?
2. How do you react to God accomplishing his work and purposes through *our efforts*? Does your theology allow for this idea that we are *synergos*—God's co-laborers?
3. How specifically can you work toward the harvest this week? Who can you name and intentionally decide to pray for and plant the seed or water the seed of the gospel with?
4. How often have you prayed for God to work through you—to labor with his energy and his strength?