

1 Corinthians 3:9

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Date: 25 January 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] One of life's permanent challenges is to have a proper view of ourselves.

Let me just try and explain that a little. I think our natural tendency is to have a higher view of ourselves than is merited. But there's also the danger of having too low an estimation of who we are and what we are worth. And both of these misconceptions bring us, and indeed in turn, bring others all kinds of problems. The Bible provides us with a true and a balanced view of who we are as men and women, and indeed of who we are as Christians.

And when we grasp the Bible's perspective of who we are, it enables us to view ourselves as God views us, which is really what is most important, to see ourselves as God sees us. For the proud and the self-sufficient, the Bible is pretty clear, we might even say brutal, and certainly honest in describing the human condition. We are sinners, incapable of any spiritual good apart from God's grace. But then for those who perhaps struggle with a very low view of who they are and what their worth is, who may be doubt that they have any value at all, the Bible has a word of hope and encouragement as it reminds us and assures us that all of us, whatever our circumstances, however difficult our life has been, we are all created in the image and likeness of God and of immeasurable value in God's estimation.

As Christians and as Christian workers or servants, and if we're Christians, then we are necessarily also Christian servants. We also need to have a proper sense of who we are and how God views us.

And in this regard, there is one quite astonishing description of believers that we find in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. And in the reading, I just highlighted the particular expression that Paul uses that I want us to think a little bit about this evening. In verse 9 of the third chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul uses this language to describe God's people. He's thinking very particularly of those who are leaders in the church, but there is no doubt that the description used applies to all Christians. He says, for we are God's fellow workers. And he goes on in the verse to say, you are God's field, God's building. We'll make brief reference to that second part in a few moments.

[3 : 43] But our particular interest is to focus on these words, for we are God's fellow workers. But before we do spend a little bit of time thinking about this expression, we need to just have a little bit of a feel, of a grasp of the context in which Paul expresses himself in this way. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, one of the issues that was causing big problems for the church was what we might call today, I think we'd call it a developing personality cult around prominent leaders. Maybe it began as something healthy, those who perhaps had come to faith through the preaching of Apollos or Paul or who had grown in their understanding of the faith under the teaching of these men. There was, understandably, an affection for them, an appreciation of them. But this had developed in a way that was very unhealthy to the point that there were these divisions arising in the church. And some would say, as we've read, you know, I follow Apollos. And then the other believers would say, well, no, I don't follow Apollos, I follow Paul. And you had these different groups developing, following one or other leader. Paul and Apollos are the names mentioned here, but perhaps there were others, other bands of believers. And the issue was a false and an exalted view of Christian leaders that was inappropriate and indeed harmful to the cause. And Paul is responding to that. He's one of the ones who is named. He is one of the ones who people want to follow.

And he recoils from this. And not only does he recoil from it, but he responds to it in the teaching that he brings in this letter. And how does he do that? Well, one of the things he does is that he brings himself and Apollos, and indeed every servant of God, down to sides. These are men who are being wrongly exalted by those in the community of faith. And he says, no, you should have a proper view of who we are. And really what he does is he brings himself and Apollos, and as I say, others, down to sides. And it's really quite a descent in the language that Paul uses. And we'll just

highlight one or two things he says. We don't want to spend too much time on this. This is really just bringing us to the expression we want to think about. But there in verse 5, for example, what after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants. You're exalting us. You're placing us on a pedestal as being, oh, so wonderful and so important, but we're only servants. That's all we are. We're only servants.

It's not right for you to view us in the way that you are viewing us, because we're only servants. Well, at least that's something, to be a servant. But look what Paul goes on to say as he continues to bring all servants down to sides. Notice what he says in verse 7. If we pick it up from verse 6 to get the idea, he says, I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. And then he says, so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.

This is very drastic in terms of bringing himself and Apollos down to sides. He says, we're nothing. The one who plants, the one who grows is in anything. Isn't anything. I think not anything basically means nothing. We're nothing. Of course, Paul does this. He brings himself, Apollos, and by implication, other Christian leaders down to sides, bringing them even to the point of describing himself as nothing. He does so that having been brought down to that place, he and others might be better able to look up and see the one who is everything. Because the reason he speaks of himself as nothing is because he's contrasting himself with God. We're nothing. The one who brings the growth, the one you should be extolling and worshiping and admiring, is God. He is the one who makes the plants grow. He is the one who draws men and women to the faith.

And it's in that context that it's intriguing to read on and discover what Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, goes on to say about God's servants or workers. This expression that we've already highlighted a couple of times, for we are God's workers. Having rightly, from one perspective, emphasized that we are nothing and God is everything, Paul now goes on to celebrate and to recognize the reality that we are something and not just anything, but God's fellow workers.

[9 : 05] And I want to focus on two truths implicit in the expression that Paul uses that highlight the the deep and delightful privilege of being God's servants, laboring in God's mission.

The expression that he uses, it seems to me, speaks of God's condescension in mission, and it speaks also of God's companionship in mission. These are the two principal things that I want to just comment on very fleetingly that we can draw from this expression that Paul uses. We are God's fellow workers. First of all, let's think about God's condescension. Now, the idea of God's condescension is at the heart of the gospel. God condescending to us to come and be among us and one of us is at the heart of the gospel message. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The incarnation of the eternal Son of God is the most amazing act of divine condescension, leaving the glory and the majesty of heaven and coming into this sin-sick world. We could not imagine or envisage or discover anything greater in the matter of God's condescension. We recognize that that is at the heart of the gospel.

But I think it's interesting to notice that God's condescension is also at the heart of mission. Just pause and think about this expression that Paul uses. We are God's fellow workers. How does that strike you? Sometimes when there's a phrase that's maybe in a measure familiar, we hear it, and we don't really pause to think, well, what does that mean? What is being said? We are God's fellow workers. Does the language that Paul used not strike you as daring to the point almost of presumption.

How could the likes of us ever be God's fellow workers? To really kind of get our heads around this expression and how it's understood or how it could be understood, it's only fair to recognize that some have tried to, I would use the language of tame, have tried to tame the expression and translate or interpret the expression as meaning something along these lines, that we are fellow workers in the service of God. So, if you can just kind of picture this, what Paul would be saying, if that's the case, then yes, we are fellow workers. You know, Paul and Apollos were fellow workers. We are all fellow workers. We are the ones who relate in that way. We're fellow workers in the service of God. So, God isn't one of the fellow workers. We are the fellow workers in the service of God. And some would try and argue that that is what Paul is saying here. But it seems to me that that is not what Paul is saying. The language that he employs and, indeed, the context in which he uses this expression, I think, points in a very different direction and points to the more startling, you might even say shocking conclusion. And that is that we not only are in God's team, but that God is on the team. We are fellow workers not only of God, that's of course true, but we are fellow workers

with God. And it seems to me that that is what Paul is very startlingly saying here by using this language. Of course, in the context he's been speaking of the team in gospel work, the one who plants, the one who waters, and the one who gives the increase.

[13:08] Now, it's true he's been highlighting that the one who gives the increase is the one who has the prominent role. But nonetheless, what is being presented is a team, God working together with us, God as our fellow worker in the work of the gospel in God's mission. And so what I say is that the very fact that God would describe himself in that way and describe us in that way is a very telling and dramatic illustration, or not illustration, but a demonstration of God's condescension, even in the work of a mission. That God would use us at all in the fulfilling of his mission is remarkable enough that he would describe us and consider us as his fellow workers almost defies comprehension. So the expression speaks of God's condescension in mission, but I think it also speaks of God's companionship in mission. One commentator on this verse, John MacArthur, doesn't say much about the verse. The nature of his commentary is not a very precise one, but he does respond to this verse, and he responds with an economy of language that is commendable and striking. He responds to this particular expression, we are God's fellow workers with these words.

What divine companionship! It's interesting how, you know, we can look at the same expression and draw out different implications, not contradictory by any means, but different implications, and how this particular commentator, what he's struck by is how this speaks of God's companionship. Of course, that's true, isn't it? If we are God's fellow workers, then he's with us. He's not some distant boss who gives us instructions and says, well, this is what you need to do, and you do this. No, he's our fellow worker. We are God's fellow workers. He's with us. He accompanies us in the work of mission.

This expression not only speaks of condescension, it speaks of companionship. It not only speaks of privilege, it speaks of presence, of God's presence with us. God is with us. God accompanies us. God stands by our side in the work of mission. And of course, to be clear, when I'm talking about the work of mission, I'm not just talking about Manuel and Patty Reano in Colombia or those who cross frontiers. I'm talking about what all of us do as Christians, as we witness for our Savior, whatever we are in our work, in our office, among our friends, and at work, and college, whatever that might be. God is with us. We are God's fellow workers. We could even say, grounded in Paul's language, we wouldn't dare to use the language, were it not for the fact that we have this warrant on the basis of what Paul says, we could even speak of God, in some sense, as our colleague in mission. Now, let me be clear, to avoid any misunderstanding, we're not saying that that's all that God is. Of course not. But we're saying that this is one way that God himself presents himself as our fellow worker. We are fellow workers with God.

When we think of God's involvement in the work of mission, and it's interesting to just think about that, obviously, as a present and continuing activity and work, to think of that in the context of language that we often use, and with good reason, concerning the finished work of Christ. I think even this evening in prayer, I've used that expression, the finished work of Christ. And, of course, we have every warrant to use that language. In using the language, all we're doing is echoing the language of Jesus himself, who on the cross cried out, it is finished. We recognize and we acknowledge that the atoning work of Christ is a finished work. It's done. Nothing needs to be added to it. It's complete.

[17:52] But while recognizing that, we ought not to draw the false inference or conclusion from that, that the Lord is no longer working. The Lord is still working. He is working with us in the work of mission. Notice how His involvement is described in Mark's gospel, just to highlight this or reinforce this with language we find in Mark. In Mark chapter 16 and in verse 20.

The interesting thing about this is that it's describing Jesus working with the disciples following His ascension into heaven. And notice what it says there from verse 19. After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and He sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere. Well, that's fine. But notice what it then says. And the Lord worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it. The Lord working with His disciples by His Spirit, even though He was now, as He is, continuing. Ascended at the right hand of the Father. We also have something that perhaps we've noted in the past, the language of Luke as He opens the book of Acts. We know, of course, that Luke has his two-tone *magnus opus*, the gospel of Luke, and then what we know as the Acts of the Apostles.

The interesting thing is that when Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles, he's directing the book, dedicating the book, however we understand it, to this fellow Theophilus. And he says to him, when I wrote my first book, I wrote to you about all the things that Jesus began to do.

That's very telling. He's speaking about a gospel and he's saying, in the gospel, I told you about what Jesus began to do. You might say, what do you mean began to do? Did he not finish everything he had to do? Well, no, he began. And the implication is, and now in this book, the Acts of the Apostles, I'm going to tell you about what he's continuing to do. And of course, all that ties in with the language that Paul uses here, that we are God's fellow workers. God accompanying us in His work of mission. God's companionship in mission. But let me just finish by noting one other aspect that we can draw from when Paul goes on to say in this same verse, you are God's field, God's building.

[20 : 43] From that, I want to draw out one final and further truth, and that is God's confidence in mission. Now, where do we draw that from these words of Paul addressing the church, saying, you are God's field, God's building? Now, there's so much that could be said about the pictures that are used here of a field, of a building, or temple, but we're not going to go into all that could be said. I simply want to leave you with one thought in the light of the language that Paul uses. And the thought is this, or the thought that can be developed by asking this question, what does God see when He looks at His field? Paul says that the church is God's field. He uses that picture language, the church is God's field. And my question is this, what does God see when He looks at His field? Well, maybe He sees lots of things, but one thing that He definitely sees is the harvest. He sees the harvest that is being harvested day by day, but He sees every harvest, every harvest that there's been, and also every harvest that there will be. He looks on His field, and He sees the harvest. He sees every man, woman, and child who will be drawn into the family of God, graciously drawn into God's family. He sees that.

There's no uncertainty. There's no question mark as to whether it will happen. There's no doubt in His mind if one or other will be left behind, if one harvest will be left unharvested. No, none of that. He looks on His field with absolute confidence that what He has determined will happen will happen. God's confidence in mission. Of course, the great thing and the wonderful thing is that we can share in God's confidence. Similarly, when we think of the picture of a building, you are God's building.

Some suggest that the word that is in mind or the building that is in mind is the temple. You are God's temple. But leaving aside that particular debate, what is it that God sees when He looks on His building when He looks on the church? Well, certainly He sees a building that is in construction, in construction, and yet He is able to see it also as complete and perfect. He sees His building, and there is not one stone missing or out of place as He looks on His building, the church. He looks with confidence at that which He is constructing, and we can share in His confidence.

And that is very important for us in the practical matter of doing God's work. You see, we may, and with very good reason, often feel that we are inadequate for the task that God has given us, maybe individually, where God has placed us, but perhaps collectively as a congregation of God's people, we can feel inadequate, that we fall short. We were just so poor at doing what we ought to be doing, and of course it's good to be honest in evaluating ourselves, but in the midst of that recognition of our inadequacies, we need to also grasp hold of this great reality that we can share in God's confidence concerning His church, concerning the fulfilling of His purposes, concerning the ingathering of His people, and the construction of His temple, that which will be constructed as perfect, just as He intends. We need to remember, as we are involved in the work of mission, who is by our mission, who is by our side, we need to remember the language, the very daring language that Paul uses to describe God's people, for we are God's fellow workers. So, as you go into the world, into Aberdeen, to your office, to your classroom, whatever it is that you are going, even tomorrow, go with that assurance, with that confidence of who you are, of who we are. We are God's fellow workers. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do...