First Corinthians 3

Introduction:

1. Paul taught the gospel, worldly wisdom, election, regeneration, and the Spirit's mysteries as an interruption (1:17 - 2:16).
2. He then returned to correcting their divisions over preachers and their carnality when he was among them and even now.
3. If you wonder what you will get out of the chapter, remember every word of God is pure and this is apostolic doctrine; it is important for every believer to be established in the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).
4. There is a ministerial emphasis in this chapter, but every saint of God can be strengthened in his knowledge of Christ; for the Holy Spirit and Paul wrote this chapter to the whole church at Corinth. Therefore, we shall follow the Spirit's guide.
5. Every minister should humble himself and tremble before these words, for the warning is very plain and very severe.
6. There is a jewel at the end of this chapter, worth the wait of studying the rest, which shows our great position in Christ.

Outline of Chapter 3:

1. Corinth had been a carnal church (1-2)
2. Corinth was a carnal church (3-4)
3. Ministers have a very minor role (5-9)
4. Warning to ministers about their work (10-17)
5. Natural wisdom of men is nothing (18-21a)
6. Saints should see beyond ministers (21b-23)

3:1 **Paul described the saints at Corinth as having been carnal babes rather than spiritual men.**

A. Paul here returned to his rebuke of Corinth for the preacher factions and divisions (1:10-16).
B. He had just identified the great difference between natural and spiritual men (2:14-16).
C. Using the difference of natural and spiritual men, Paul labeled theses saints as quasi-natural.
D. **Carnal**. Related to the body or flesh; natural or worldly, not spiritual (Rom 7:14; 8:7; 15:27).
E. He did not call them natural men; they were born again; but they had been carnally minded.
F. Note that he described them as carnal during the eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18).
G. He had not fed them the deeper and more spiritual things of God's word for their weakness.
H. Carnal living will absolutely dull your appetite and ability for the spiritual things of Christ.
I. Rather than think so highly of yourselves, I want you to know that I considered you infants!

3:2 **Paul declared that there was much more for them to learn, but they were not ready for it**.

A. He had not fed them the deeper and more spiritual things of God's word for their weakness.
B. Carnal living will absolutely dull your appetite and ability for the spiritual things of Christ.
C. Rather than explore the great mysteries of Christ, he had spent much time fighting carnality.
D. Paul put this highminded church in their place by describing their carnality then and now.
E. He transitioned at the end of this verse into the next by moving from the past to the present!
F. He rebuked Hebrew saints for the same lack of progress in Christ's religion (Heb 5:12-14).
G. He explained this matter to the Hebrews by wanting to leave the basics behind (Heb 6:1-3).
H. The reason for lack of progress in spiritual growth in Christ is carnal thinking and living.

3:3 **Paul told the Corinthian church they were still carnal and explained the nature of it**.

A. He transitioned at the end of the last verse into this by moving from the past to the present.
B. Envying, strife, and divisions indicate a person or a church is carnal, just like natural men.
C. It is natural men who are malicious, selfish, hateful, and hating one another (Titus 3:3).
D. There is nothing truly spiritual about a church that has contentions and divisions in it.
E. There is nothing truly spiritual about a saint with envying and strife in his heart (Jas 3:14-16).
F. The measure of a child of God, which can hardly be emphasized enough, is Christian charity.
G. Where is the difference Jesus identified as the true proof of His religion (John 13:34-35)?

3:4 **<u>He identified their carnality as indicated by their preacher factions in exalting mere men</u>**.

A. They were separating into cliques and divisions according to preachers, just like natural men.
B. The church was not of one mind, as he had commanded when opening the subject (1:10).
C. Paul and Apollos were both great men in some regards, but why get haughty about either?
D. As he is about to explain in the next five verses, there is no reason to glory in ministers.

3:5 **<u>He destroyed preacher preferences by teaching that ministers themselves are not much</u>**.

A. Paul and Apollos were mere men with the same faults and weaknesses as all other men.
B. He had not been crucified for them, and they had not been baptized in his name (1:13).
C. All ministers, even Paul and Apollos, are simply tools of God in bringing the truth to men.
D. The Lord gave every minister His grace and his office, and his abilities and successes (3:6-7).
E. Ministerial success, conversions of men, is a gift from God, as the Lord gives to every man.
F. And it is the Lord Jesus that gives the power to believe and convert to the gospel of Christ.
G. Without regeneration, the work of God, no preacher can help any man (1:18,24; 2:14-15).
H. Without opening a man's heart, God's work again, no preacher can help a man (Acts 16:14).
I. If the Lord does not grant repentance, it does not matter what a minister does (II Ti 2:24-26).

3:6 **<u>Paul compared Apollos and himself to mere farmers in the pursuit of raising a crop</u>**.

A. How important are the roles of planting and watering in getting the eventual harvest? Little!
B. The corruption of a seed to bring forth the life of the new plant is entirely the work of God.
C. What happens to a seed without its life, without sunshine, without photosynthesis, etc., etc.?
D. But there would be no full growth of the plant without the seed being planted and watered.
E. God provides the life and essential operations of grace to regenerate a man and prepare him for the gospel, and faithful ministers bring the plant to full maturity. But the plant is of God!
F. Paul planted: he was first to Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). Apollos watered later (Ac 18:27 – 19:1).
G. Jesus Christ has His children: He will regenerate every single one of them (John 5:21,25).
H. Jesus gives a parable introducing this very metaphor of farming for ministry (Mark 4:26-29).

3:7 **<u>Paul concluded the role of ministers was very minor and insignificant compared to God's</u>**.

A. Paul continued his excellent metaphor of farmers into this verse that he began back in 3:6.
B. Who ever dreamed of thanking a farmer for seed life, seed growth, soil, sunshine, etc., etc.?
C. What does the farmer have to do with the fantastic multiplication of the single seed sown?
D. Conversion of men from pagan idolatry to Christianity is for all purposes the work of God.
E. Ministers may bring the news of the gospel – planting and watering, but that is not much.
F. There was no reason for the Corinthians to exalt teachers, for God deserved all the praise.
G. Their ability and interest to believe the gospel was totally a matter of God's grace and power.
H. Ministers are important, but not on a relative basis to God, which should end divisions.
I. Jesus thanked His Father in heaven for those who perceived the gospel (Matt 11:25-27).

3:8 **<u>Paul did recognize that there was a difference in ministerial application and faithfulness</u>**.

A. Paul continued his excellent metaphor of farmers into this verse that he began back in 3:6.
B. No matter who gets the draw for planting or watering, they have equal roles in the harvest.
C. There will be a difference in yield and profit based on the individual efforts of the farmer, for the yield and harvest varies from farm to farm based on labor, all other things being equal.
D. All ministers are equivalent in several senses: they are called by the same Captain; they have the same frailties; they need salvation equally; there is no difference in authority or office; they all serve one Lord Jesus Christ; they have one business and objective; they preach one faith and baptize with one baptism; they have one Scripture; they know only one church; their roles in salvation are equally limited; and they shall all be held accountable equally.

E. For these reasons, there was clearly no reason for the Corinthians to honor one over another.
F. Ministers do differ in application and faithfulness, earning rewards proportionate to labor.
G. Consider the parable of the talents and the varying abilities and application (Matt 25:14-30).
H. Paul warned Timothy to apply himself for greater profit and to avoid failure (I Tim 4:13-16).
I. Paul confidently knew he labored more abundantly than all the other apostles (I Cor 15:10).
J. God does not reward His servants for their success, but for their labor; for success is by God.

3:9 **Ministers work together with God, like farmers and builders, in bringing conversions**.
A. All ministers work "together" toward the one goal of conversions, with God as the Lord.
B. But the spiritual plants or spiritual building are the Lord's, with ministers merely as servants.
C. The church at Corinth, and so all churches, is God's great work with some lowly servants.
D. There is no room for preacher factions, nor is there any room for ministerial glory (I Pet 5:3).
E. This is a transitional verse as Paul moves from a metaphor of farming to one of building.

3:10 **Paul admitted his role was a little unique as an apostle, but all ministers must be faithful**.
A. We had a transitional verse before, now Paul is using the metaphor of ministers as builders.
B. God graciously chose Paul for the glorious work as the great apostle to the Gentiles.
C. Paul was not a mere builder of the house of the N.T. church; he was a wise masterbuilder.
D. He had more knowledge about such things than any other man, as indicated by writing all the Gentile general epistles and all the pastoral epistles (Eph 2:11-22; 3:1-13; I Tim 3:16).
E. Paul was first at Corinth, because God had chosen him for a unique work (Acts 13:1-3).
F. Jesus assigned Paul mainly to foundational work – establishing new churches by evangelism.
G. His ministry did not take advantage of foundational work by others, which was true of the jealous and carnal preachers at Corinth, who leeched off his earlier work (II Cor 10:12-18).
H. Apollos and others came after him and further served the churches like Corinth (Acts 18:27).
I. In addition to Apollos and Cephas, the church at Corinth had other prophets and teachers.
J. Paul, as Christ's wise masterbuilder, warned ministers, especially at Corinth, to be faithful.
K. Churches require ministerial faithfulness, for they can cause disaster (I Tim 4:16; I Cor 9:27).
L. Corinth had numerous problems caused by ministerial weakness (5:1-2; 6:1; 11:20; 15:12).
M. Ministers can overthrow the faith of God's elect, though salvation is sure (II Tim 2:14-19).
N. The apostles were great foundational stones, but Jesus is the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20)!
O. The foundation is the fundamental work of conversion, by Paul here, to faith in Christ Jesus.
P. The ministers following Paul would have choices or opportunity to add wisely or poorly to it.
Q. Paul warned all ministers, not mere saints; and he particularly warned Corinth's ministers.

3:11 **The true churches of God have a single, sure foundation – Jesus Christ and Him crucified**!
A. He had already taught at length about the uncompromising gospel of Christ (1:17-24; 2:1-5).
B. Regardless of market surveys, we preach the foolish and offensive gospel (I Cor 1:22-24).
C. Regardless of trends in hearers, we preach the word without compromise (II Timothy 4:1-4).
D. There is no salvation in any other name under heaven, but that of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).
E. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus only (I Timothy 2:5).
F. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch for their Christ-centricity (Acts 11:26).
G. There is no room at all in the kingdom of Christ and His churches for glory to any man.
H. All ministers must have John's attitude: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).
I. But the key here is that all ministerial labors must match up with the foundation of Christ!
J. What is the foundation? Peter was told it. Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Matt 16:16-18)!
K. We can never move from that foundation, and we cannot let it be tampered with at all.

3:12 **<u>Ministers have a choice what they are going to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ</u>**.

A. Here we have a church's foundation in Christ, as at Corinth, with ministers building on it.
B. Church planting is what Paul did, the work of evangelism – preaching to the unconverted.
C. Church building is bringing a church to maturity and the full measure of Christ (Ep 4:11-16).
D. Paul listed six building materials in his metaphor – three are very good; three are very bad: three can abide the fire and heat of a trial; three are consumed entirely by the trial (14-15).
E. This verse is very important in this generation: we are in the perilous times of the last days.
F. Gold, silver, and precious stones are the doctrines and practices of true godliness (I Tim 6:3).
G. Wood, hay, and stubble are any false doctrine or practice corrupting Christ's true religion.
H. The Jewish legalists certainly built with wood, hay, and stubble (Galatians 5:1-9; Heb 13:9).
I. The end-justifies-the-means boys teaching gain are wood, hay, and stubble (I Tim 6:3-5).
J. The effeminate creeps of the perilous times of the last days are such builders (II Tim 3:1-7).
K. The lying and seared priests of Rome have added much trash to the foundation (I Tim 4:1-3).
L. The compromising entertainers itching ears with fables are horrible builders (II Tim 4:3-4).
M. The prosperity and health gospel of the Charismatic televangelists are stubble (Jer 23:28-29).
N. Ministers who played church a few minutes a week will be found wanting (I Tim 4:13-16).
O. Dead fatalism of men blinded and confused by sovereignty is but wood, hay, and stubble.
P. Turning the religion of Christ into a proselyting business rather than holy living is mere hay!
Q. The ungodly association with the world condemned the prophetess at Thyatira (Rev 2:20).
R. Carnal Christianity, contemporary and casual worship, and other current trends and innovations are obviously and horribly the wood, hay, and stubble Paul warned against!
S. The present trend of foaming enthusiasm and praise services are contrary to Christ's religion.
T. See "Contemporary Christianity": http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Sermons/pdf/ContemporaryChristianity.pdf.

3:13 **<u>Every minister will have his labor exposed by the light and fire of Jesus Christ's coming</u>**.

A. Consider the first and last clauses, which are the most important, as they answer the last verse and are explained by the other clauses. God will expose and reveal every minister's labors.
B. It is ministerial work being manifested and revealed, not church members (3:13a and 3:13d).
C. It is building components of God's church that are being manifested and revealed (3:10-12).
D. Every minister will be held strictly accountable for what he built on the foundation of Christ.
E. Let every ordained preacher of the gospel tremble before his fearful and terrible Captain!
F. Remember! We are dealing with a metaphor: we cannot leap to literal interpretations. Should we apply "planting" to baptism or "watering" to baptism in his previous metaphor (3:6-8)?!
    1. This is not the fire of hell directly; for neither ministers, saints, or doctrines go to hellfire.
    2. This is not the fire of purgatory, as papists say; for works, not men, are what is burned.
    3. The fire is part metaphor and part prophecy; it is God's judgment to try ministers' works.
    4. Fire consumes wood, hay, and stubble; but it refines gold, silver, and precious stones.
G. The day that shall declare and expose ministerial labor is the coming of our Lord Jesus.
    1. Paul had already given this day earlier to give us a solid reference for "the day" (1:7-8).
    2. He will take up this same day and event in the next chapter for exposing ministers (4:5).
    3. He will take up this same day when explaining the purpose of church discipline (5:5).
    4. Paul, as a minister, lived and taught with that day in mind (I Thess 2:19; 3:13; 5:23; II Cor 1:14; Phil 2:12-17; I Tim 6:13-16; II Tim 4:1-4; 4:7-8).
    5. Peter also understood that ministers would be tried at the coming of Christ (I Peter 5:1-4).
H. However, though not Paul's thought here, there are more manifestations of ministerial folly.
    1. The Lord does not have to wait for Judgment Day to expose false ministers (Mal 2:1-9).
    2. Jesus taught His disciples to measure false prophets by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20).
    3. And He showed that religion other than His would not stand life's tests (Matt 7:21-27).
    4. The folly of effeminate, carnal teachers of the last days would be exposed (II Tim 3:6-9).

5. Jesus sends heresies into his churches to reveal approved saints (I Cor 11:19; Ex 8:19).
6. The truth will expose and reveal false doctrine by its light (John 15:22; Eph 5:13).
7. A true minister of Jesus Christ will show up the frauds (Matt 7:28-29; Mark 12:37-40).
8. False ministers cannot profit people as can true ministers (Jer 23:32 cp I Tim 4:13-16).

3:14 **<u>If a minister's labors withstand the examination and trial of God, he will be rewarded</u>**.

A. God does not reward his servants for their <u>success</u>, but for their <u>labor</u>, for success is by God.
B. Yet every minister is duty bound to labor only in those holy things compatible with Christ.
C. Abiding work is ministerial labor in pure doctrine and practice that edifies Christ's churches.
D. Paul saw the Thessalonians as his future crown of rejoicing at Christ's coming (I Thess 2:19).
E. Paul labored and avoided personal carnality to obtain a crown (I Cor 9:15-27; II Tim 4:6-8).
F. Peter told the elders among the saints he wrote to expect a crown from Christ (I Peter 5:1-4).
G. And to this agree the words of our blessed Lord regarding His servants (Matthew 25:14-30).
H. The Son of Man in glorious apparel reminded two pastors of their crown (Rev 2:10; 3:11).
I. Daniel prophesied of New Testament teachers as heavenly stars forever and ever (Dan 12:3).

3:15 **<u>If a minister's labors are consumed under trial, he will be saved, but his labors will be lost</u>**.

A. Again, the criterion at a minister's examination is labor, not success; for success is from God.
B. Consider our glorified Lord's warning to the pastor, and church, at Laodicea (Rev 3:14-19).
C. An unfaithful, lazy, or neglectful minister will lose his reward and squander his opportunity.
D. If he is a child of God, he will receive eternal life; but he will be barely saved from judgment.
E. The metaphor pictures a man barely escaping a burning house with only his skin intact!
F. What could have been an honored servant of Christ is consumed down to eternal life only.
G. Our brother John warned a lady and her children of securing their full reward (II John 1:7-9).
H. God's judgment that comes on churches can leave saints scarcely saved (I Peter 4:17-18).

3:16 **<u>A single local church is the temple of God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God</u>**.

A. Paul's point is to magnify the seriousness of ministerial faithfulness to any and all teachers.
B. This verse is different than 6:19 where their "body" (a collective noun for all their physical bodies) is the temple of the Holy Ghost, for the context there is without a doubt the physical body used in fornication, which body was purchased by Jesus Christ for holiness (6:13-20).
C. The King James serves us well by using the definite plural pronoun "ye" and "your" here.
D. The AV1611 is far superior to any modern version that wants to get rid of "thee" and "thou," for the rule is absolute and valuable – pronouns beginning with 't' are singular, and pronouns beginning with 'y' are plural, which precise language the modern versions have all lost!
E. The Corinthian saints, considered together collectively, were the temple of God Himself.
F. The Corinthian saints, considered together collectively, were indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
G. This is precious church doctrine – a single local church is the temple of God the Holy Spirit.
H. Since a local church is vital to God's worship, every minister must be cautious and careful.

3:17 **<u>Paul warned any and every minister of Christ of the danger of defiling the temple of God</u>**.

A. Any familiar with Jewish worship would know the seriousness of desecrating Israel's temple.
B. Nadab and Abihu, though Aaron's sons, were consumed for trying innovations in worship.
C. Uzziah got leprosy in the face for thinking he could presume on the office of a priest.
D. There is certain judgment for any man, especially ministers, which defile a local church.
E. He will address in a few chapters the issue of many being weak, sickly, and dead at Corinth.
F. Having sobered any ministerial ambitions in Corinth, Paul the wise apostle moves on.
G. Applying this verse and the previous one to the use of tobacco is ludicrous and ridiculous.

3:18 **<u>Paul humbled any at Corinth pursuing vainglory and tells them to become fools to be wise</u>**.

A. Returning to his rebuke of preacher factions, Paul attacks any arrogance by their teachers.
B. There were likely those in Corinth by Greek influence who sought to retain Greek wisdom.
C. With all the emphasis against Greek wisdom since 1:17, there must have been a real problem.
D. There was a serious threat among the Greeks to succumb to human philosophy (Col 2:8).
E. How did Solomon become wise? He told God he was a child and did not know what to do!
F. How did Jehoshaphat win a huge battle? He also told God he did not know what to do.
G. Pride cometh before a fall, and wise men will humble themselves to receive God's wisdom.
H. The sure way to true wisdom is to become a little child (Ps 119:18; 131:1-3; Matt 11:25-27).
I. The great and glorious God approaches unto those men with humble spirits (Is 57:15; 66:2).

3:19 **<u>Paul repeated his point from the first chapter that worldly wisdom is foolishness to God</u>**.

A. We do not have an epistle to saints in Athens, so this provides his opinion of Greek wisdom.
B. The greatest thinking and wisdom in man's history occurred in Greece, which our institutions of higher education still admire and worship, yet Paul ridiculed it as foolishness to God.
C. The blessed God will take a man who thinks himself wise and make a fool of him (Job 5:13).
D. If a man thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself (Gal 6:3).
E. We are not deceived by the professed wisdom of the world, but the poor worldlings sure are!

3:20 **<u>Paul provided further Bible proof that God considers the thoughts of men to be vanity</u>**.

A. This quotation comes from Psalm 94:11, where David ridiculed the thoughts of men as vain.
B. Paul added further Bible evidence of the vanity of any worldly wisdom of the Greeks.
C. Vain man would be wise; he presumes he is special; but he is born like an ass (Job 11:12).
D. Consider what their thoughts accomplished when they applied them to God (Rom 1:19-32).
E. It is our privilege, as enlightened sons of God, to count worldly wisdom vanity (Ps 119:113)!

3:21 **<u>Since worldly wisdom is foolishness and vanity, there should be no glorying in men</u>**.

A. Paul drew a conclusion by his use of "therefore," indicating a refutation of any glory in man.
B. He summarized the carnality of their divisions, his God-exalting metaphors of farming and building, a minister's fearful role as a minor builder, and the folly of worldly wisdom (1-20).
C. He introduced a final point to the chapter showing their status as a further reduction of man.
D. As children of God possessing all things, there is no reason to follow or glory in any man.
E. If all things work together for good for the called, why divide over preachers (Rom 8:28)?
F. The faithful child of God, though adopted, is in a most exalted position of honor (Rev 21:7).

3:22 **<u>In case they did not understand, Paul gave a short list of things that were for Corinth</u>**.

A. The position of a child of God is so exalted, all the named things are designed for their good.
B. The universe is the Lord's, and He is directing and using all things for the sake of His elect.
C. The concept with which Paul ended the chapter is so exalted as to be likely missed by many.
D. There is enough matter here, in the last sentence of the chapter, for a study unto itself. Glory!
E. These things serve the elect, are owned by the elect, or cannot hurt the elect (Rom 8:37-39).
F. Paul, the greatest of the apostles, was their servant for God's greater glory (II Cor 4:5,15).
G. All ministers are merely servants of the church, gifted and sent by Jesus Christ Himself (5-7).
H. The world belongs to the elect, is understood by the elect, and shall be his own inheritance.
I. Life is a rat race of vanity and vexation for others, but it is an abundant life for God's elect.
J. Consider a believer that was a bondservant; he should realize he is Christ's freeman (7:22).
K. All things – even death – work together for good to the elect (Rom 8:28; 14:8; Phil 1:21).
L. Even your body has been purchased, so death and burial are for you in Christ (15:23)!
M. No matter whether it is things you can see nor or mysteries of the future, they are all yours.

3:23 **A believer is the blood-bought possession of Jesus Christ, and He is the Son of God**.

A. In light of their position in Christ, Who is the Beloved Son of God, preachers do not count.
B. This verse explains the origin, reason, and basis for their possession of all things just listed.
C. The relationship originated with God, Who gave the elect to Jesus Christ before all time.
D. The elect are the possession of Christ and God by choice and purchase (6:19-20; Eph 3:1-12).
E. Paul opened this position and goals of the elect rather clearly to the Colossians (Col 3:1-4).

Conclusion:

1. If you do not know if you are Christ's this morning, then lay hold of Him by faith (Gal 3:26-29; Acts 13:48).
2. If you are not sure you are Christ's this morning, then make your calling and election sure (II Pet 1:10-11).

Additional study:

1. See the outline on Contemporary Christianity: http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Sermons/pdf/ContemporaryChristianity.pdf.
2. See outline on God confusing men: http://www.letgodbetrue.com/Sermons/pdf/Is_God_the_Author_of_Confusion.pdf