



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 3:5-9

Topic

Paul compares the church to a field and believers to field workers who need to humble themselves in their service by shunning recognition and giving all the glory to God

Title

*"How Do You Field?"*

## Introduction

One of my professors at the junior college I attended in San Bernardino worked as a writer/photographer for Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers newspaper, *El Malcriado*. One year he took a sabbatical from teaching to work in the fields. When he wrote about his experiences he took each of the five senses - sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing - and wrote a chapter describing how a day out in the fields affected him through that sense.

We understand a lot about agriculture here in the Valley. Even if you're not directly connected to ag you can't help but be exposed to the cycles of plowing and planting and watering and harvesting. Everywhere you see the sights and hear the sounds, you even smell the smells, of those who are working the ground.

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The apostle Paul was attempting to explain to the Corinthians what serving in the church was like. In our chapter he will liken the church first to a field then to a building. It is the church as a field we want to consider today.

**If the church is a field then Christians are its field workers.** No matter your gifting or your role or your office in the church, you and I are all to consider ourselves field workers. It's at once a humbling but empowering perspective.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Work Hard Everyday In The Lord's Field With No Thought Of Recognition, and #2 Your Hard Work In The Lord's Field Will One Day Be Rewarded.

#1 Work Hard Everyday In The Lord's Field  
With No Thought Of Recognition  
(v5-7)

Some of you have worked in the fields as seasonal employees. Others of you may own fields. When it comes to the church and to ministry, all of us are to consider ourselves field workers in the Lord's field.

Let me remind you what was going on in Corinth. The believers remained immature. So much so that Paul said they were carnal (fleshly) and acting like babies. The particular problem he was dealing with in these opening chapters was division in the church. They were forming factions around the teachings of either Paul or Apollos.

It revealed a profound misunderstanding of the church and ministry within the church. Regardless your particular gifts or talents or abilities, and regardless your role or office in the church, you and I are all to consider ourselves field workers.

1 Corinthians 3:5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?

"Who then is Paul?" *Well, how much time do we have!* He was only the greatest missionary of the first century and arguably of all time. He was

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charged with writing a great deal of the New Testament under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. It was given to him to explain and establish the great doctrines of the church age. I'm just scratching the surface.

“And who is Apollos?” He was a gifted Bible teacher who could argue masterfully that Jesus was the Christ promised in the Old Testament. He was the Charles Spurgeon of the first century in terms of delivering powerful messages.

All that and more being true of both those guys Paul said of himself and Apollos that they were “ministers.” Not ministers in the sense we might understand the word as meaning ‘pastors.’ No, the word means “servants.” It's the same word we get ‘deacons’ from. It was used of those who served by waiting tables. But Paul wasn't saying they were deacons holding an office. He used the word to indicate that both he and Apollos were nothing more and nothing less than servants who waited tables.

I like a good waiter or waitress. It makes dining out enjoyable. Good table service can definitely enhance the meal. But if the food is great I compliment the chef, *not the waiter or waitress*. I might tell you to try to sit in a certain section to get better service, but I wouldn't tell you that the food would be better. That would be dumb.

The Corinthians had gotten their eyes off of God and on to men. That's always a prescription for disaster.

Paul and Apollos were merely channels or conduits “through whom” the Corinthians “believed” and were taught. The “Lord gave to each one” of them their gifts and their role but none of that was to elevate them as being over the Corinthians or the head of any factions.

To make himself absolutely clear Paul illustrated their particular serving as that of field workers.

1 Corinthians 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.

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When you work a field it is to obtain a harvest. Paul called it “the increase.” If your goal is the harvest, “the increase,” then while everything you do is critical and important and nothing is more important than anything else. You could argue that without planting watering is useless. You could argue that without watering planting is doomed to fail. But if you are working toward a harvest then both are just as important.

“God gave the increase.” God’s plan for Corinth was for Paul to bring the Gospel initially then have Apollos come and teach the believers. The harvest would be fruitfulness in their lives - the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of reproducing themselves through their witness and testimony.

Those things were hindered and halted because they were giving recognition to men rather than giving glory to God. We grow up in a culture that recognizes achievement. We want to recognize others and we want to be recognized.

I remember a particularly humbling experience. Back in 1986 or so I was blessed to be part of a large group of Calvary Chapel pastors invited to minister in Japan. I think there were about twelve of us altogether. Not long after the trip, at the annual Pastor’s Conference, Greg Laurie was talking about the trip. He started naming all the guys that went. I listened intently for my name. As he got closer to the end without mentioning it I could see him struggling to remember. Finally he ended the list by saying “And another guy,” or something like that.

You need to fight the natural desire to be recognized and replace it with a sincere desire for God to get the glory. One of the key ways you can protect yourself and others, I believe, is to be involved in a local church and submitted to its leadership.

1 Corinthians 3:7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

“So then,” if you will shun recognition or recognizing others, your focus will remain on “God who gives the increase.” You will be fruitful and your church will be fruitful.

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I wonder if Paul would rather have been the waterer? I wonder if Apollos would rather have been the planter? A lot of discouragement in your serving the Lord comes from wanting to do something or to be someone that the Lord has not ordained.

Field workers don't have the luxury of choosing what they want to do. They must work according to the conditions of the field. Too often Christians fence off a portion of the field, they claim it for themselves, and go about their lives as if the field was theirs. It isn't. It's the Lord's.

Field work is incredibly hard work. At least it was in Bible times without the aid of modern machinery. Whether it was plowing or planting or watering it was tough going. It was repetitive. It required patience. But in the end the field yielded its increase.

The joy is in the work because you are doing it as unto the Lord. It doesn't really matter where you are doing it, or at what stage the field is at. Just do it as unto the Lord.

## #2 Your Hard Work In The Lord's Field Will One Day Be Rewarded

(v8-9)

You should shun recognition but one day you **will** be recognized and rewarded by the one Person who really counts.

1 Corinthians 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

Field workers are "one" in the sense that one person's work is never more important than another's. Paul will make this same point in another illustration when he says the church is like a human body. All its 'members' are important to its proper functioning.

He then leapt ahead to the future when "each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor." I know Paul was talking about the future because he goes on in this chapter to describe our standing before

the Reward Seat of Jesus Christ after the church is resurrected and raptured to Heaven.

The emphasis here is on your own “labor.” It’s a powerful word, this word “labor.” It is used to denote not so much the actual exertion you experience but the weariness you experience from that exertion. It’s a word that assumes you will work in the Lord’s field in such a manner that you can be described as exerting yourself. You’ll work hard. You’ll put in long hours. You’ll work overtime.

Jesus certainly exerted Himself. He ministered tirelessly but grew very tired in the process. Yet instead of getting physical rest He would often spend all night in prayer with His Father. Throwing Himself down to rest for a while at a well He nevertheless obeyed the leading of His Father in Heaven to dialog with a Samaritan woman - a woman who treated Him with contempt and sarcasm at first and told Him partial truths.

Paul certainly exerted himself in ministry. Listen to his description of his labor for Jesus.

2 Corinthians 11:23 ... in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.

2 Corinthians 11:24 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.

2 Corinthians 11:25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;

2 Corinthians 11:26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

2 Corinthians 11:27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness...

The thing to realize is that Paul wasn’t ‘venting.’ He wasn’t complaining to his accountability partner. He wasn’t on sabbatical for ‘burn-out.’ He was describing the normal Christian life of exertion for the Lord. He understood the time was short. Either the Lord would return to rapture him or he would die. He would thus be able to say at the end of his life,

2 Timothy 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.

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2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Let's at least get back to thinking that physical exertion in serving the Lord is normal.

Remember, though, that the exertion is only partly physical. We mentioned weariness as the real meaning of the word "labors." To that effect Paul said, at the end of the passage about his many trials,

2 Corinthians 11:28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

Paul was emotionally spent. He considered it something that went with the territory. Again, we're not talking about what we label as 'burn-out' needing some sort of sabbatical or therapy. Weariness is to be expected and is resolved by looking to the Lord. It is overcome by talking to Him, by getting alone with Him.

**A true, spiritual weariness cannot be aided by slowing down or stopping your work for the Lord. It can only be resolved by finding the Lord in your work.**

1 Corinthians 3:9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field...

In context Paul was correcting the Corinthians for their fleshly recognition of either he or Apollos or anyone for that matter.

In a larger context he was telling us that we are **all** "God's fellow workers" individually and that the church collectively is "God's field."

I always find this incredibly liberating and encouraging. Here's why. In the end I will be rewarded for my "labor" and *not* for any results. You see, by

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definition **the results are up to God**. I cannot make anyone “increase.” I can only plow or plant or water.

In Heaven who would get the greater reward - Jonah? or Jeremiah?

- Jeremiah ministered faithfully during a difficult period. As far as we can determine he may have had one convert!
- Jonah was used to bring one of history’s great revivals. The entire wicked city of Nineveh believed and repented. He sat and sulked over it.

I think you get the picture. **Your labor is what will be rewarded**. In the following verses Paul will expand on this and talk about your motives and the materials you use in ministering to others.

The field in these verses is definitely the church. Not the church as a universal entity but each individual local church God has raised-up to bring Him glory. Find your place in the church; don’t make your own place.

You might want to plow but it’s planting season. You might want to water when it’s time to prune. You can’t stake-out your own portion of field and expect a spiritual increase. The flesh can do a lot; it can mimic spiritual growth. But in the end you’ll only have recognition now, not reward later.

Once you’ve found your place in the Lord’s field exert yourself with the gifts and talents and abilities God grants. Put at His disposal **all** your time, talent, and treasures. *The Lord is at hand!*

The field in other portions of Scripture is the world. Or, more properly, your world - the places where you live and work. Labor there, too. Exert yourself. God wants to give an increase. Leave the results to Him.

In your exertion don’t expect or entertain any recognition. Your reward will come in due time.