

God Gives the Increase

In the last two weeks, we have learned about God's desire to make us fruitful and prosperous. I preached from Psalm 1, and we learned that God wants to bless us, to make us fruitful and prosperous, but it is up to us to make the choices that will lead us to God's blessings. And, last week, we learned from "Joseph the Dreamer" how faithfulness leads us to fruitfulness and prosperity as well.

Today's third sermon is on the subject of "God is the one that gives the growth," and it deals with the notion that we can only be successful if we support one another and we stay aligned with God's purpose. I believe each one of us is gifted to contribute to our success; however, the challenge for us is to not to lose sight of our goal and get distracted away from God.

The teaching Scripture is 1 Corinthians 3:4-9, let's read,

For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

In this text, Paul addresses the issue of partisanship that was creating divisions within the life of the Corinthian church over its leadership. The two leaders who have become the flashpoint of pride and division are Paul and Apollos.

But Paul and Apollos were not the ones causing the quarreling; it was the church people lining up behind favorite teachers saying, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," and boasting in them in such a way that quarrels and divisions were happening.

Nevertheless, in Paul's view, he and Apollos were merely field hands whom God used to cultivate a crop. And he uses an analogy from agriculture to suggest that the church is like a watered garden, he said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

While people were cheering up for their "champion" in Paul and Apollos's, Paul told them that the one they needed to be focusing on was God, not them.

With this, then Paul asks the question, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" and he answered it by saying, "servants through whom you believed."

This is very interesting. Instead of asking, as you and I might have done, "Who is Apollos and Who is Paul," he asks, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?"

Paul was teaching them a proper perspective on the leaders that God has placed among them so they could understand that God's servants are not dignitaries but functionaries. He wants them to see their leaders less in terms of their personality and status and giftedness and more in terms of their function, that is, their calling to serve God and God's purposes.

So, in that light, how does Paul describe himself and Apollos? What is their function? The simple answer is "servants." Paul and Apollos are servants. In other words, Paul was telling the church, "you need to readjust the way you think about your favorite teacher." What are they? Not superstars but servants.

When I think of a servant in our context today, I think of table-waiters—I know what that means because I was a table-waiter; that was the first job. So, with Paul explaining, "we are merely servants," he is emphatically saying that Apollos and he are not the honored guests. They are not at the head of the table; they are not the owners of the house; they are not the makers of the food. They are the table-waiters.

This is very significant. While these people were lining up behind their preferred teachers, Paul warned them not to put them in the wrong place, meaning, as the source of their faith.

He explained this when he said, "servants through whom you came to believe." "Through whom" is a key phrase here, which means that the power that brought you to faith did not and does not reside in them. It flows through them. Paul and Apollos are not saviors. They are not the gospel. They are not the Holy Spirit. They are not the source of power. They are not God. They are servants. And the faith they teach comes through them, not from them.

Do you see what was happening here? People were distracted by personal preferences and misunderstandings; they were getting off track and out of focus on their calling and what matters. They were missing the target.

I know we can relate to this because it is an issue that happens in all churches, families, and just about any person we come across. We think that blessings and wellness come from stuff or other people, and although they may well be channels of blessings, ultimately, it is God the source and sustainer of our wellbeing.

Think about it, how many times have you been distracted in your faith journey and life because you misplaced your value or the value of others -including God- and ended up putting your trust in anything but God to fulfill you. This is not a new thing. In fact, the whole Bible is about this: people believing God, people getting distracted and losing track, then coming back and getting restored. And so on.

Now, this sets up the stage for the next and main point I want to make today. Let's read Verse 6 once again, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

This kind of makes the same previous point but with different words.

Paul and Apollos are laboring according to their calling and giftedness. This business of "planting" and "watering" means that some preach, some teach, some administrate, some play

musical instruments, some sing, some pray, some are financial planners, some are gifted in the use of technology, some are ushers, some like to visit, some like to send cards, some are good with children, some give help to the poor and the needy, some do maintenance and help keep the church clean and looking good, some cook, some are involved in community outreach doing the work of justice and loving mercy, but God alone is the one who brings the blessing, gives and sustains the increase.

Therefore, Paul saw himself and Apollos, with their differing ministries, not as rivals or competitors but as partners in God's work. He saw the Corinthians as "God's field, God's building," that is, not as his field, nor as Apollos' field, but as God's. Their ministry was a coordinated effort involving different persons and different abilities in a common field and toward a common goal and all centered in God and for the purposes of God.

This is one of the reasons churches and any other organization gets off track, when there are competing visions about what they ought to be, they pull each other apart without realizing that without Paul there is no seeds, without Apollos there is no water, and without God there is no life. But, if we focus on what God wants for us, there is nothing stopping us and we will achieve tremendous success when everyone contributes in the way that God designed us to do so.

Can you hear what I am hearing? We can have the nicest building, a massive budget, the smartest people, the greatest and best-looking preacher (...), but if our attention is on anything but God, there won't be lasting growth. The emphasis must always fall on God, not on us. All effectiveness in ministry is because of the direct intervention and power of God. Remember that it is said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1).

If anything, I believe this should cause us to take a deep sigh of relief. The decisive cause of all of the blessings is not the planting and watering, it is God. Yes, we work and obey and participate diligently, but we can, with joy and peace, recognize on whose capable shoulders the end result falls. God alone is worthy of all the glory and honor for any fruit, any prosperity, any increase, and any growth in us and our church.

And this are the good news. As I said before, we just need to be attentive in staying faithful to God, following God's path, and being diligent in keeping God's Word, and God will provide the increase, the fruitfulness, and growth.

I have a final story to finish that speaks to what we are learning today.

One spring, a farmer purchased an old, run-down, abandoned farm. The fields were grown over with weeds, the farmhouse was falling apart, and the fences were collapsing all around. He planned to turn the place into a thriving enterprise.

The farmer invited his pastor to stop by on the first day to say a prayer for the farm. The pastor could see what a mess the place was, but blessed the farmer's work, saying, "May you and God work together to make this the farm of your dreams!"

A few months later, the pastor stopped by again to call on the farmer. Lo and behold, it was like a completely different place— the farm house was completely rebuilt and in

excellent condition, there were plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on feed in well-fenced pens, and the fields were filled with crops planted in neat rows.

“Amazing!” the pastor said. “Look what God and you have accomplished together!”

“Yes, Pastor,” said the farmer, “but remember what the farm was like when God was working it alone!”

--Evelyn Weston (<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/god-gives-the-growth-evelyn-weston-sermon-on-god-s-provision-91085>)

What does this say to us? It says don't let our church become an old, run-down, abandoned “farm,” so to speak.

Instead, let us use our strength, our resources, our abilities, and diversity of talents and gifts within each one of us to join God in what God wants to accomplish: a fruitful, lasting, and life-giving church, the church of our dreams.

“Passing the faith to the next generation.”