

The Local Church - God's Work

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Date: 14 June 2026

Preacher: John Groves

[0 : 00] Isn't Jesus good? And we are, we're in for a real treat now. You are about to, John is about to come and open the word to us. John Groves is part of Hope Church in Winchester.

He's been involved with helping and overseeing this church for the whole time that Andrew's been with us. Now I'll hand it over to Tim Blaber, who many of you will have heard preach here before.

Andrew was just telling me before how John was instrumental in him coming here by giving a prophetic word that kind of changed the course of Andrew's life and led to him coming to Alton in the first place that John Cleve doesn't remember from his face, but that's okay.

So he has been not just helpful to this church, but actually really key in everything that's happened in the last 10 years. John is a wonderful teacher of the Bible. He's been part of our movement since the very early days.

And I'd really commend you to listen to what he would say to you. Can we welcome him? Let's give him a round of applause. Thank you. Thank you, Tim. That was a warm welcome.

[1 : 03] And yeah, I think I recognised myself. No, to be honest, thank you very much. And it is lovely to be here. And it is true that I've known Andrew and Emma for many years.

I remember actually earlier than that when you came to the South and Bournemouth. So we've had many years serving together in different ways. And it's such a delight also to have Malcolm Pan with us this morning, because I know Malcolm was very involved with this church.

We came to Winchester in probably 2002 from Hastings, and I think Malcolm was already engaged with what was going on here. So both of us have had many years of links with you.

And it is a delight to be here for this particular momentous occasion. I sort of know Tim and Helen not so long, but got to know you quite well in the recent years.

So that's lovely. I feel I'm among friends and commending friends to friends, which is always a delight. My only disappointment, Marion's disappointment, is she's not here with me. She planned to be, and she sends her apologies.

[2 : 08] I'm genuinely disappointed. She commented on it as I came out the door this morning. She has a number of joint problems, arthritis or whatever. One of her knees just blew up.

Well, it didn't literally blow up. She'd be in A&E, but you know what I mean. Very swollen and painful, and she's just got to rest it and see if she can get it back to something of working order over the next few days.

So she's really disappointed. So I'm going to share with you from 1 Corinthians 3, and it's a well-known passage and yet a very important one because it tells us quite a bit.

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we have an amazing little passage on the local church. So this will be a fair bit about you, Harvest Church, Alton, but also those who lead you and serve you, of whom Andrew and Emma have outstanding examples over the last 10 years.

So we're going to read from verse 5 of 1 Corinthians 3 just down to verse 15. Paul is obviously writing. He's writing to a local church, the Corinthians. That's his context.

[3 : 15] The Holy Spirit inspired that, set it down for us, and here's our context to read it in. Same Holy Spirit will help by God willing to apply it. What then is Apollos?

These are people who've been involved in the planting and strengthening of this church historically. Not just one person, I note. So you've got an Apollos and a Paul here, Malcolm and myself.

Not that we're in that same class. But it's been quite classic, characteristic, that a number of ministries have served. So anyway, what then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each

will receive his wages according to his labour.

For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. [4 : 22] Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on that foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it.

Capital D, that's the day of judgment. The day will disclose it. Because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire, or as out of a fire, like a house burning, and your life is saved, but you've lost your possessions.

That sort of image in that last verse, quite sobering and challenging. Well, we've only got a short time, so I want to highlight a few things. First thing I want to say here is that there are, actually there's three pictures quite close together.

There's two pictures I want to talk about that refer to the local church, with a plural you, and here they are. You are God's field, you are God's building. Now the third one that I briefly referred to, I didn't read, comes in verse 16, you are God's temple.

[5 : 41] And they're all very, very relevant. They teach us a lot. We're not going to be able to dig into them, we're only going to look at two anyway. But they're two, a group of people like yourselves, and they're saying you are God's field, God's building, God's temple.

Now notice something straight away, that in all three, there is a clear, clear statement. God's building, God's field, God's temple.

And the church, or any church, this church, doesn't belong to the leaders, however hard they work, however gifted they are, and even however long they've been in a place.

And, you know, sometimes people have been there for decades. But the church doesn't belong to the leaders. It's God's church. But also, the church doesn't belong to the people who come and gather as such.

They are perfectly okay to talk about my church, this is my church. We can all use that term. But it doesn't belong to you. It doesn't belong to a group within a church.

[6 : 47] Now, I don't know. In fact, I don't believe there are little inner groups here. But sometimes in a church, there are. It can be sort of long-term family connections, or something else, or someone who built the building, or something.

But the church doesn't belong to any of the human agents who build, who make up the church, no matter how hard they've worked in it, or how much money they've given to it.

A church, a good church, and I believe this is a good church, understands that it's actually Jesus' church. It belongs to God. This is God's church. And first and foremost, we're here to honour him, to praise him, and to glorify him, and to spread the good news about Jesus.

And first and foremost, before any human agent, it is his church. And he is the one in charge of what happens. We're only here by the grace of God, and we only continue by the grace of God. And as I said, our reason, both as a church and as leaders of the church, our reason for being here is the glory of God, and his service, and his mission, and his ministry.

[7 : 55] So we'll come back to a couple of those pictures, talking to you in a few moments, God's field, and God's building. But I want to highlight another little category, which is in verse 9, God's fellow workers.

Paul says of himself and Apollos, we are God's fellow workers. You're God's building, God's field. So also the leaders are gods. They belong to God.

They belong to God. Those who are pastors, teachers, and leaders of a church, they don't belong to the church. They are God's fellow workers. And in a sense, that again, sort of cuts both ways, if you like.

It means that we are not able to say, as we've already said perhaps, that this church belongs to us. But the church isn't able to say, well, they're our people.

We hang on to them. We dictate what they do. We obviously work as a team. We work as a symbiotic body, hopefully. But to be honest, the leaders have to say, God put me here.

[9 : 04] God called me here. I'm here for his purpose and for the goals he gave me. We're God's fellow workers. So as we perhaps, we're going to start with that point, God's fellow workers.

As we look into it, we're going to focus straight away and say, this is a bit of a special morning. We say goodbye to Andrew and Emma, who've served this church for 10 years, faithfully and well, and are moving on to Portsmouth and to be part of the church down there, Christ Central.

And we've welcomed, I was here on February the 1st, when we welcomed, already they were here, Tim and Helen, but Tim became the lead elder, in a sense, replacing Andrew's role as leading the eldership team and the leadership team of the church.

And he's been appointed and we're delighted and thrilled to have had Tim and Helen with us and now properly established in that role. Also, we mustn't forget Sean and Helen, who faithfully served for many years here as a part of the eldership team and of course, Rob and Clem, who've also faithfully served for many years, probably not as long, I think, to be fair, as Sean, you've been here for a very long time, is that right?

But these people are also God's fellow workers and of course, that's not actually an exclusive list, but it is true of how leaders should view themselves with regard to the church.

[10 : 34] It's important we see ourselves like that. And in verses 5 to 8, which I've already read, there are a number of little sort of points that help us as leaders and help us to regard leaders quite carefully and rightly and I think biblically.

So, we all need to see our leaders as, first of all, as I said, the Lord's servants. And although they are serving the church, that's because Jesus wants them to.

Their role is servants of the church, but their master is Jesus. An interesting sort of tension I've already referred to. The church isn't their master, but they are here to serve it.

Jesus is the one who's their master. But they are not to lord it over the church. They're under shepherds. These are God's people. We must treat them carefully and lovingly. They're not our people in that sense.

But the church, as I've already said, is not saying, we pay you, you're here, do what we... So they were some sort of welfare service or something. They're not here under our demand.

[11 : 37] They are here serving God and therefore serving us. And it is a subtle and important and actually a precious tension. And it works very well when everybody gets it.

That's why I think it's worth referring to it this morning. It really does work well then. Like a marriage works well when both the husband and the wife get what God says to husbands and wives.

And don't swap hats so the husband doesn't tell the wife, the Bible tells you to do this, that, and the other. Wife doesn't say that. The Bible tells you to do this, that. That doesn't work. What does work when each individual says, oh, that's what Jesus calls me to.

And that's the same, less intense perhaps, but the same principle. The church understands who leaders are, leaders understand who they are and walk in humility in that role, accountable to God for what they do and what they say.

So there's a really interesting balance here which we could spend longer on. But they also, as you read these verses, it says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

[12 : 49] So that is another interesting and important thing. God knows what a church needs. God knows whether you need a seed sower or a planter or, as it were, a waterer or a carer or whether you need, when you need, those who weed out the weeds, when you need the harvester.

I mean, we can push the image too far perhaps, but what we need is variety of gift, variety of input into a church, variety, which is why we need a team leading us and they shouldn't all be the same. We don't need a team of four pastor teachers, but we also don't need a team of four administrators. So, you know, we need, or four prophets, that's pretty horrendous, but it's wonderful to have a prophet and I speak from experience.

So that, that these things are all good if there's a variety and imbalance and that probably applies if I can, because this is really the context in this scripture, wider.

So it is good that different people, even having Malcolm and myself here, have an input into a church. It's how God planned it. It's how churches are kept healthy and growing and relevant to this morning, of course, particularly, is we've had the service of Andrew and Emma and Andrew is a great gift and I would say, if I may be so bold, quite an unusual mix and a good mix.

[14 : 15] Very unusual and I think this church has benefited enormously from their gifting. Andrew really has. And now we have another leader, another leading sort of couple, if I can put it that way,

Tim and Helen, and that's a different gift mix, but you need that now.

And that will be a blessing. And it's almost the way God works. We've done the bit of the watering or planting or whatever, now we need some watering or whatever.

Paul's very, very positive about we're different, Apollos and I. God does different things with us. We're the same. And we thank God for what we've received from Andrew and Emma and we look forward with eager anticipation to how Tim and Helen will input us and lead the team and lead the church.

So I believe in all of these things, God will give the increase. There will be harvest. There will be growth. There has been and there will be. Let's move on then quickly to the last, well, the next two points I want to make, which is about God's field.

So it's about the church. God's field. Now, field probably refers to something more like a vineyard or maybe a small holding if we could think of it that way. But for us, it's probably like a farm or a garden.

[15:29] Either will do. The most important thing is, and it's a pretty important thing, I think, is it's an organic picture. It's organic. So when church is a product of and overseen by the God of creation, and you have to look at creation to get an idea of what church is about and how church works and how even salvation works, I dare to say, even our lives.

There's, you know, there's a lot of indicators in Scripture. Your own salvation. You're born again of the Holy Spirit. There's a birth as a result of your faith in Jesus.

And you grow. And you grow from childhood to maturity as a believer. And there can be the need to feed and grow.

And there can be different sort of strengths and weaknesses in different seasons in your life. That's a whole personal thing. But in a way, with church, it's similarly organic. Of course, a different model. This one is the field. And we, as human beings, particularly in the 21st century, are not really very familiar with that.

[16:41] We're very industrial, techie-driven. I mean, you know, I'm happy to have my iPhone. I'm not anti it. But, you know, it's swipe.

I get ever so impatient if the thing takes more than about five seconds to do what I want it to do. Honestly do. I catch myself. Honestly. Within less than the last, within the last 24 hours, I've twice tried to check my weather app.

And if it didn't deliver within about 10 seconds, I switched it off to try later. I mean, I think, what's the matter with me? The thing, you know, because it shouldn't. It comes up normally, boom, like that.

Oh dear, my poor connection. I won't bother. I mean, that's a ridiculous state of mind. I'm talking about myself. And the impatience of it. So, you know, we're used to that sort of thing.

And it's not how God works. Look at trees. Look at farms. Look at gardens. Look at anything organic that he made. It is a process.

[17:41] It is, by our standards, quite slow. I mean, it really isn't, but it, see, we've just had our garden completely redone. It's not big. Don't worry. It was only about as big as this stage.

But it's lovely. We're delighted. We moved house last year. Really pleased with it. But we've had it all done. And so Marion's putting flowers and plants into some raised beds we've had put in. And I'm enjoying it.

But literally, I mean, it's quite, you have to get into a different frame of mind. It's quite restful to just go and look at every day. But you go and look at it and it's taking awfully long time for some of these seeds to grow, in my opinion. You can tell my battles with patience.

But, and I think, are they dead? Do they need more water? Do they need? No. Marion's much better. No. Just leave them. They'll be fine. Don't swamp them. Put water on them.

Hurry up. So, you have to, there is a process. And actually, I believe it's the same in church. It takes time to grow church.

[18:37] It takes time to see people mature. And seeds sown, it takes quite a while, you know, the gospel, it often takes a while to reap and it's come home.

And I think the leaders of our church, the fellow workers, are more like shepherds or farmers or gardeners than they are managers or factory workers or business people.

And although we can learn from all those things, and I really think this is a battle, it may not be so intense for you. I think you're more mature, look, and a bit more switched on.

But sometimes I feel it is a battle to get through to church leaders who I work with, particularly those who might be slightly younger or bigger churches, frankly, or in more big urban things.

Look, it isn't like running a business. You're not like a CEO. And it's not like, you know, I mean, it's loads and loads to learn from it. But actually, from the Bible perspective, and it is timeless, it's not just 2,000 years old and therefore out of date.

[19 : 39] It's timeless. God has made it like that way. So it would be quite good to think, what do gardeners do? What do farmers do? What do they do rather than what does a high-performing CEO do?

And I think it's, not that we can't learn from those things, but the things that the gardener or the farmer works on or can work on are only things that aid growth.

Can't make it grow. He can aid it. He can work on the environment. And there's a subject there for a series of talks, he says, having done it many years ago.

But if you look at how do we create a good environment for growth, you can learn a lot from the Bible. You need good food, so that's the word of God. You need prayer, water the thing.

You need the Holy Spirit gifts. Think of 1 Corinthians 12 and how the body works. You need spirit and word worship. I'd say you could go in several scriptures, but just John 4, spirit and truth. You need community life.

[20 : 38] Think of all the one anothering and practical love, generosity, fellowship. You need a grace emphasis, not a law emphasis. You need it Christ-centered, welcoming strangers, hospitality, outward-looking, mission-focused, heart for the poor, heart for the nations.

You know, you need discipline, which is pruning and weeding, pest control, which is against false teaching and wolves, and so on and so forth, and faith, of course, and setting something. The list could be pretty long.

You've probably got a series of 20 or 30 if you want to do it. But how do we create an environment for growth? Well, that's sort of the major thinking of leaders, not can we kick them or incentivize them a bit more in some way.

Not that anybody does that, I hope. But do you know what I mean? We can't shout at the plants to make them grow, and we can overwater. If we keep getting impatient like I might, we can kill them, actually.

We can give them too much. If anything, they'll die. Water or, you know, feed. Just pile more manure on them. That won't help either. So you actually have got to think what is the environment, and it is a helpful, helpful way to think of church and church leadership.

[21 : 50] So how do we work on, can work on the environment, can't work necessarily on the actual growth because God gives the increase. Let's talk a little bit about God's building too before we finish.

It's obviously a change in metaphor, and God is building building people together. Let's be very clear. I know I'm preachers and converted with this one, but it is very important to always state, whenever you can, that the church is not buildings.

I know we call them churches. They're all very useful, perhaps in some ways, and that's a long and ancient tradition, although it's not necessarily biblical for that reason. But churches are not really the buildings.

They're not the organisation. They are people. Now, people benefit from the buildings. People build them, and they have some value for the people. The organisation clause is important, but actually, the church is living stones built together.

So, you know, basically the two bits of cement that are most important are love for Jesus and love for one another. So churches are buildings where each brick is connected to Jesus and then connected to the other bricks of that particular building, which is actually a temple, which is another talk for another day.

[23 : 14] So, actually, we are a living building, but we do have a foundation, and Paul talks about foundations here, and actually foundations can be a bit odd in churches, especially when we've all had a long history, as we have in this country.

Sometimes the foundation is predominantly tradition. No, not that all tradition is wrong, but that's all it is, or the main thing it is. Sometimes it can be sentiment, frankly, or sometimes it can be a sort of division from others.

Almost the whole foundation of this is about saying what we're not or what others are wrong. You know, it almost can come into the name, a reaction. Sometimes it is a doctrinal, one doctrine, accurate to that doctrine.

It can, sadly, even be one person's ministry. All churches can have those as their... But that, those things may have some relevance if you want to look at our history, but they must be highly questioned and made very, very secondary, because the foundation that's any good for a living church is Jesus Christ.

So the foundation is we're here to love him and worship him and proclaim the good news about Jesus. That's all we're foundationally really about and the outworking of that, the gospel and how it's outworked in our lives and in our town and in everything we do.

[24 : 41] That is what we're building on. We're not building to maintain a tradition, to maintain some thing that was a really important thing to get very up, you know, to state 200 years ago or 300 years ago, you know, those were battles we're not fighting.

You know, I think it may be only 50 years ago, but we're not really building on those things. We're building on Jesus. Healthy churches are founded on Jesus Christ and Paul's very clear don't build on anything else and I believe you are, but I think you always got to keep checking.

The dynamic is not quite as rigid as a building. It's more of a life organic dynamic in a way that's a more important picture. So, you know, you do have to make sure we stay on the right foundation and Paul implies that people can come in and start building on a different one.

So our foundation is, I would hope, Jesus as laid out in the New Testament, apostolic doctrine about Jesus and then building up with props, many rooms and lots of interesting extra bits as we go up, but foundationally it's on that.

That's what every church is and that's what every leader builds on. We won't have time to explore it, but I did read it for a purpose. The last half of what I read was about be careful how you build and Paul contrasts gold, silver, precious stones with wood, hay and straw.

[26 : 10] This is something for leaders and I say as a leader, I think we need to be challenged and thoughtful and it's also something for perhaps all of us as church. How are we building our church?

And Paul seems to lay out two, what he does, two sorts of material. Gold, silver and precious stones, wood, hay and straw. Now you, again, have got a whole sermon there which you're not going to get, don't worry, but in actual fact there are some obvious headline points that don't take long to see.

Gold, silver and precious stones as actual entities are not things human beings can grow and nurture and they don't appear fast and easy to grow.

Whereas wood, hay and straw we're very much in control of. You can grow it, you can do what, you know, you can cut it down, you can shape it and it's often large quantities, the other three things are generally in smaller quantities.

Really you could say the gold, silver, precious stones are very God dependent. They're very much dependent on finding them, God made them if you like, in creation.

[27 : 18] You've got to find them and they will be treated with care and there will be hard work involved in shaping them. Whereas a huge pile of straw or hay is relatively easy to deal with and comes in large quantities.

Now you could go on all day about it, but I would say briefly that wood, hay and straw means things we can grow, we can manipulate, we as human beings, leaders, we can control, quick, easy to work with, quick results, rather lightweight and therefore it speaks of human centred.

It speaks of our ideas, quick fixes, again back to our perhaps cultural norms, unfortunately. Things that maybe glorify us quite quickly, wow, you can see something, a reward for your work within a morning almost, but they tend to be flesh driven rather than spirit driven.

They tend to be things that aren't going to last like the things that God does. So we need to be really careful with all we do that we don't waste our time in church building because that's what we're talking about here, it's all burn up.

They're not lost, verse 15 is clear, it's not about salvation, you're saved through the blood of Jesus, but there is a reward which is not to be despised, not to be ignored, not to be treated as a super spiritual, I'm not interested in rewards, or, you know, oh I don't care, as long as I'm saved, I'm not bothered, that's a foolish thing to say.

[28 : 44] Clearly these will be moments of reckoning of some sort where there'll be an oh my word, waste of time moment, or a wow, I didn't realise that God was in all that.

And it's sort of scary, and I speak as a leader, and I think the answer is to keep short accounts with God now. The answer is, realise we're accountable to God now, so seek God as a leader, I'm talking, but it could be true of all of us, seek God, Lord are you in this, is this your, is this my glory, my ego, what's my motive here Lord, what's my motive, is this a quick fix, glorify me, see what I've done, or is it something where I know it's you and your work, and I'm unprepared to take the hard work with it.

I think you have to check your heart all the time, because I don't want it all to come out on the last day that a huge amount of it was a waste of time.

I really don't, I really don't, and I pray for all of us that's not, I don't believe it is true of the leaders we've got here, but only God knows, although I can say that and I mean it genuinely with polite and care and thought, I think it's good to leave a little frisson of nervousness.

I don't want to totally pat you on the head, or myself for that matter, you know, come on, let's always keep, and I think you probably can do both, you could probably put a load of good stuff in and then a load of rubbish, and you need to sort of work out, it's not much use if it's got some gold in it and then a whole pile of straw, it looks a mess, so let's make sure it's all gold, let's make sure it's all gold.

[30 : 25] And the good news is you can build with these precious things. So the good news is God wants you to, God's for you, not against you. Now I speak to other leaders, I speak to all of you, because we're all going to have this.

God's for you, he doesn't want you, he's not sitting there smirking, saying, oh wait till they get to judgment day, they've got a shock coming. Now, God is for you, so that's why I say walk with open heart, open conscience as before the Lord, saying God, help me, help me to walk worthy of you, but also to build with your materials.

And he wants that, he doesn't want his house to be a pile of straw, he wants it to be gold and silver, valuing, lasting, eternal, of course he does. and he wants to be able to say, well done, good and faithful servant when we meet him face to face.

And that's the note I want to end on so that the musicians can come up, but I will want to just say a little more, because I do believe, as they settle behind me, I do believe that, honestly believe, that Andrew and Emma have done well, and I think they're going to hear, well done, good and faithful servant, though as I say, it's not my place to say that, but I do feel we have had a wonderfully blessed time to have this couple in that senior role, and I think we have moved on and forward in this church's life quite effectively over the last ten years, and I think many of you will feel quite sorry to see them go, because they're good friends, and they've served us well.

But it is also right, I believe God called them here, believe God is calling them on and called Tim and Helen here, and I believe they will, already are probably, and will be a great blessing to you.

[32 : 13] God knows what he's doing, he changes tools, some one old writer said, I can't remember, I think it was F.B. Meyer, he often changes tools to show the work is his and not ours, like any good workman.

Now, you know, pick up a hammer, put it down, pick up a screwdriver, it's my work, not man's work. So we'll be praying for them and thanking them later, and I'll hand back to you, Tim, and to... To me. To you, sorry. Thank you so much, John. Friends, if you're...