



The Church & Culture

How To Stop Status Seeking

McLean Bible Church, it is good to be with you today. I'm the campus pastor over at the Arlington campus and I am excited to open up God's Word . If you have a Bible, head over to 1 Corinthians 3. We're in the middle of a series called "The Church and Culture," in which we're walking through Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, chapter by chapter and verse by verse.

As you head over there, I have one quick announcement. As you know, our church is committed to making disciples and multiplying churches. One of the ways in which we do that is by supporting many church planters in our region through our New City Network. In addition to praying for them, I have a way for you to support them. In the lobby, you'll find baseball cards that have the face of a church planter on them, along with their families and ways to pray for them. I want to invite you to pick up a set and put them where you'll be reminded to pray for them regularly.

We're about to dive in to 1 Corinthians 3 and do something of incredible importance. We are about to hear the very Word of God. He's the very God Who hung the stars in place. He's the same God Who knows the number of hairs on your head. This is the God Who is speaking to you through His Word, so we will do well to listen to Him. During our time together, I want us to listen to God's Word, meditate on it and consider what He might be saying to us today. I'm going to read 1 Corinthians 3—the whole chapter:

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ 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. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for 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.¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness,"²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

This is the very Word of God. Let's take a moment to pray together.

O Father, we love You and know that whenever Your Word is opened, we are hearing Your voice, so we would do well to listen. O Father, I pray that we will be a people who will live lives for Your glory, that we will say in our heart of hearts—as Psalm 15:1 says—“*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.*” I pray that we will live like that. I pray that You will be the satisfier of our souls and that we will leave here declaring to other people how they might come to know You, too. Father, help me. I am incredibly weak. I pray that You will be lifted up today. I pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

I don't know if you can tell from where you're sitting out there and with me standing on a platform up here, but let me explain that I am short. I admit that I'm very short. I'm five-foot-four and three quarters inches. You've got to give me the three quarters. That's me, but here's the thing. I'm good with that now. I am comfortable in my own skin, but that wasn't always the case.

You see, my height used to cause me a bit of insecurity. When I was younger, anytime I was around anything that I could stand on, I would do that to raise myself up among other people. For example, my boots of choice were Timberland boots. Those boots got me through high school because they gave me about three more inches of height. It was amazing.

I used to do things like doubling up socks. Or if we were taking a picture and I was one of the smaller ones in the photo, I would inconspicuously use anything around me to slyly stand up on so that it would raise me up a little bit. If we were outside, maybe there were some rocks; or if we were standing by some stairs, I would slyly step up on the stairs to make myself look a little bit taller. You may think, “Eric, that is really sad.” I’m being vulnerable with you right now, but you’re laughing at me. Seriously, that’s cool.

I share this to illustrate that we all do things like that. What do I mean? No matter who you are, no matter where you’ve been, we are all tempted to grab at things around us to elevate ourselves in the midst of other people—in other words, to give ourselves a certain status among them. Our culture is preoccupied with status.

A few years ago, there was a study done on a few Harvard students who were asked to make a choice. They were asked which they would prefer: Option A, a job in which they would make \$50K a year, or option B, a job in which they would make \$100K a year. Simple choice, right? But there's a catch. With Option A, the students were told that when they make \$50K at the job, their peers would be making \$25K. Or if when they got \$100K in Option B, actually their peers would make double—or \$200K.

In other words, in Option A, they would make twice as much as their peers, whereas in Option B, they would make half as much as their peers. With that catch, what did the majority of them choose? They chose to be paid the \$50K rather than the \$100K. Think about this. They preferred to do better than others, even if it meant less for themselves. When given a choice, they chose status. See, we are status-seeking creatures.

You may look at me and say, “Man, I don’t know about them, but I would have taken that \$100K.” Even if you’re not the type to boast out loud, I suspect you are tempted to boast in yourself at some level. There is something you’re using as a platform to elevate yourself in the eyes of other people. It may be your education. It may be your temperament. It may be the success of your children, the fact that your children are doing better than other children in comparison.

You see, one thing is for sure. We are obsessed with the way we measure up in comparison with other people. We will use anything to stand on to make ourselves feel better, to gain status. The church in Corinth was no different. I want to read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 again:

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

In this text, Paul shows what the Corinthian believers were trying to stand on to elevate themselves in the eyes of other people. Do you know what they were using? They were actually using certain Bible teachers. We see that most clearly in verse four. People were saying, “I follow Paul,” or some were saying, “I follow Apollos.” This is a thought Paul is picking up again from chapter one. To understand what’s happening here, you have to understand a little about Paul, Apollos and Peter. These guys didn’t have staff positions at the church at Corinth; they were travelling ministers. They were apostles, messengers and missionaries. They didn’t stay anywhere long. They would show up in a town, preach the gospel, people would get saved and they would baptize the new believers. Then one of two things would happen. If that town didn’t have a church, a church would be planted. If the town already had a church, the new believers would be incorporated into that existing church. If someone like Paul came to town, then Apollos came sometime after that, then Peter came even later, after a while the church would be filled with people who could trace their spiritual heritage back to a certain teacher.

Someone might say, “Man, Paul is great. He led me to the faith and discipled me.” Another person might say, “No, Apollos did that for me,” or “It was Peter for me.” There’s nothing wrong with that. But it went wrong when the Corinthians believers weren’t satisfied just to thank God for the person He had used in their lives. They began using their relationships with these Bible teachers as status symbols. “I follow Paul.” “I follow Apollos.” “I follow Peter.” It says in verse three that this boasting was causing jealousy and strife.

Paul told them, “When you do that, you are proving that you’re immature. In fact, you’re being just like the culture around you.” Remember what he said in verse one? He told them they were infants, *“people of the flesh.”* You might think being called human wasn’t a bad thing. But guys, this was not a compliment. Just like you grow physically from infancy to childhood to teenage to adulthood, when you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you also mature spiritually. You are meant to grow from an infant all the way up to full maturity. Let me put this a different way. You are meant, day by day, year by year, to grow less like the culture around you and more like the One Who saved you. This is what spiritual growth looks like. Paul is saying to the church in Corinth, “I don’t see you growing. Your growth is a little stunted.”

As a matter of fact, in verse two he gets a little harsh. He says, “Listen man, when I was there I fed you with milk. You were young and not ready for solid food.” It’s like he was saying, “I’ve been gone for years. Even now you’re still not ready. You’re still of the flesh.”

Pretty much here’s what he was saying: “Guys, when I came to you, you were in diapers. I was feeding you Similac. I’ve been gone for years. You should at least be in your big-boy underwear by now, drinking out of a cup. But you’re not even there yet. You’re still in Pampers.” Can’t you tell I’ve still got kids at home?

Here’s what Paul is getting at. When the Corinthians were using certain Bible teachers to boost themselves up, they were showing that the gospel message had yet to take root in their hearts. Instead of appreciating and praising God for the different teachers He used to build up the church in Corinth, they boasted about their relationship with them. They began to use these teachers for status.

Let me bring this home to your neighborhood right now. Until the gospel has shaped our hearts, we will never be able to appreciate the differences around us. Why is that? Because we will use those differences as platforms to prop ourselves up in the eyes of other people. They were using something as silly as certain Bible teachers to try to elevate themselves. You may think, “That’s incredibly silly. That’s petty.” We don’t do things like today, do we? Ah, yeah we do.

When we’re not secure in Christ, we will always be looking for a leg up to prove that we are somebody. Without Christ, we’re always looking for a way to feel better about ourselves, by getting above the people around us, and we can use some really weird things to do that. For some of us, we use the numbers in our bank account. “Man, I have more money in my bank account—that means I must be better.

I must be worthy. It must mean I did something incredible in order to have that, so I'm somehow better than that person.”

For some of us, it might be our relationship status, the fact that I'm married, the fact that somebody chose me, the fact that I was able to go out and pursue someone else. Now I'm tied to this person who has this career, who has these looks. I'm worthy because I'm better than this person who doesn't have that.

If you think about Bible teachers being a silly thing to build our status on, think about this. This month we celebrated Black History Month. In our country and in our world, we even use the color of our skin as a platform to elevate ourselves among the people around us. I could keep going. We use things as silly as emblems on our cars and logos on our clothes. Hear me today. The human heart is creative in the things it can use to puff itself up in pride.

That's exactly what Corinth is doing, so Paul is trying to show them a way beyond status seeking. Listen to me today, McLean Bible Church. You don't have to seek status. The way beyond status seeking is remembering Who gets the glory and Who actually gives the status. Let me explain.

Remember Who Gets the Glory

First, God gets the glory we're all tempted to take. We see this throughout this whole passage, but I'm going to read verses five to 11 once again.

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ 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. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Paul sets forth two pictures here that describe the church in Corinth. He describes them as a garden and as a building. He's saying, “Guys, when you look at yourselves now, who gets the credit for you?” He's trying to help them understand, “If you're looking at me or Apollos or Peter to get the credit, you are looking in the wrong place.” In verse five, Paul calls himself and Apollos “servants.” He's saying, “We're nobody.” In verses six and seven, he actually says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but it was God Who grew you.” Then in verse ten, Paul pretty much calls himself a construction worker. God is the Architect. Jesus is the Foundation. This is what Paul is trying to say to the church in Corinth and to us today: “If you are using me to gain status, I am a poor place to look. Yes, God used me. But listen—I'm nothing.”

Here's an illustration that drove this point home for me. This past Friday, I went to get a haircut. My wife knew I was preaching this weekend and she thought my hairline was looking kind of rough, so she said, “You can't be an embarrassment to me up there. You need to go get a haircut.” I obeyed my wife.

I went to the barber. He broke out his tools and he went to work. When he finished, instead of thanking my barber for the nice haircut, it would have been really weird for me to get up, but get his hair clippers, rub them and say to them, “Thank you for cutting my hair,” leave a tip under the clippers, then walk out without saying anything to my barber. That would be really weird!

You may ask, “Why is that weird?” Well, the clippers worked, but they were merely an instrument in the barber’s hand. Paul is saying something very similar here. He’s saying, “It is really weird that you guys are focused on people like Paul and Apollos and Peter, because we are just instruments. Paul might be the scissors, Apollos might be the clippers, but at the end of the day, we are simply instruments in the Redeemer’s hands.” Because of that, Paul is saying, “Stop using me to get glory for yourself. We’re nothing. We don’t exist for your glory. We exist for God’s glory. You don’t step on me to be a platform for your glory. Guess what I am. I am a platform for God’s glory.”

Let me bring this back home for you right now. A way you can know you are growing in Christ is when the platforms you once stood on to give yourself glory have become platforms you stand on to give God glory. They become platforms where you display the greatness of God.

Let me explain that really quickly by giving you another example. One of the things I love to do around here is sit down with people to do their church membership interviews. These interviews are opportunities for the pastors to hear from you, to hear how God has changed your lives, how Jesus has come in and saved you. I’ve heard so many amazing testimonies. But one I especially remember was with a woman from MBC Arlington. She told me about how Jesus changed her life and I think her testimony perfectly illustrates this point. As a matter of fact, her testimony is so “Washington, DC” That I would like to read it to you.

She said, “I came here because I wanted to change the world. I started to work on Capitol Hill and all I wanted was to work my way up. My work was what made me who I am and as a result, I realized that my success filled me with pride and the success of others filled me with despair. However, as I’ve grown to understand the gospel even more, my work has actually taken on new meaning. You see, the gospel didn’t necessarily cause me to quit my job, but my work no longer was the source of my identity. My success no longer made me who I am—Jesus did. I’m His daughter. So now I can work, not out of a frantic desire to prove how great I am, but to show off how great He is. I’m finally free.”

Amen. Praise God for the work He did in her life. But do you hear what she’s describing? She used to use her work as a way to prop herself up in the eyes of other people, as a platform to stand on, saying, “I measure up well around people.” It gave her status and led to her boasting in her successes and being jealous of other people. That’s exactly how Paul describes Corinth. However, in Jesus she says she’s been given the status her heart had been searching for and now she’s free to live life for His glory rather than her own.

So let me ask you, don't you want to be free to do that? What are you trusting in to give you status? What is your heart boasting in right now? What is that thing in your life deep down inside that you're really proud of because you feel like that raises you up above other people? What is that thing you desperately want to have because you think it would give you the identity your heart is searching for?

It might be similar to the woman's testimony I just read. For some, it might be your work. You work long hours, from sunup to sundown, in order to gain status in the eyes of other people.

For some it might not be your work—it might be your children. You spend your life trying to have your kids be successful in the eyes of the world so people can look at you and say your work matters. You're extra proud of the great things your kids do and you actually feel despair when you see other kids doing better than your kids.

For some, it might be your relationship status. Paul says here it could even be ministry. In verses 12-13, he's talking about his own ministry, saying, "*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for 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.*" Paul is saying, "Even in my own ministry, after establishing the foundation of the church as Jesus Christ, I can very easily begin to do ministry, not giving glory to God, but taking glory for myself."

How sobering is that? Maybe not for you, but it is for me. It would be very easy for me to stand on this stage and do exactly what I'm doing right now, not for the glory of God, but for my own glory. This is scary. At the end of the day, if we use things like work and relationships for our own purposes, do you know what we're proving? That the gospel has not sunk down as deep into our hearts as we think it has. Even as Christians, we need to rehearse the gospel.

If you've heard me use the word "gospel" and you don't know what I mean by this, the word gospel means good news. It is the greatest news you could ever hear. I want to take a moment to explain that right now. Hear me. There's a God in heaven and this God made you. He loves you. He really does. He made you for His glory. And guess what? Living life for His glory is for your good.

But we don't see it that way. There was a point in time when we each said, "You know what, God? I think we know the path to happiness more than You do." So we sinned against God. We disobeyed Him and the Bible calls our disobedience sin. Because of our sin, the actual wrath of God is against us. If we die in that state, in our sin, without our sin forgiven, we will receive God's eternal wrath and live eternity under it. But I praise God that we serve a God Who is incredibly loving and gracious to us. In His love He sent His Son, Jesus Christ. He came to earth and lived a perfect life in full obedience to His Father and for the glory of His Father. He died on a cross in our place for our sin. Then He rose again, proving He is God and that He has victory over sin, death and the grave. If any one of us will place our faith in Him, saying, "You are Lord and I am not," do you know what happens? You can be forgiven of anything you've ever

done. You say, “Eric, I’ve done some bad things.” No, for anything you’ve ever done, our God offers forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Not only does He offer forgiveness, He gives you a new status. He gives you an infinitely better status than anything this world can give you. Do you know what that status is? Child of God.

Hear me today. That status is enough to satisfy your thirsty soul. You are running after all these other statuses to fulfill yourself—that work promotion, that relationship—but the status you have as a child of God is able to satisfy you from now to and through all eternity. It really is the case.

Remember Who Gives the Status

Are you growing in your understanding that you are free from status-seeking in our world because Jesus has given you a better status? Paul reminded the church in Corinth of this. My first point was that the glory goes to God and not ourselves, but here’s another point I want to give you. God gives us the status we desperately desire. Look at verses 16 through 20:

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

I don’t want to gloss over these few verses. Paul is admonishing the church in Corinth for looking like the world and not much like Christ. He’s telling them to stop seeking their status in things that don’t matter. It may seem wise to boast in things of this world, but it is foolish in the eyes of God. Why is it foolish? Let’s go home with this point, in the last three verses:

²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

The first time I read this, I thought, “What does that mean?” Stay with me here. The ultimate reason the believers in Corinth were bragging about their relationship to certain Bible teachers was because they were insecure. They felt they needed to attach themselves to people like Paul or Apollos or Cephas to make themselves feel more powerful, to make themselves feel more special, to make themselves feel more significant.

Paul asked, “Why are you doing that, when all these things are yours?” What does he mean when he says, “Paul or Apollos or Cephas are yours”? He’s saying, “You’re dividing the church based on your allegiances to us. But guess what? You don’t belong to a particular Bible teacher. Actually, we belong to you in Christ. All of our teaching is God’s gift to you. There’s no reason to divide over us.”

Here's something really beautiful. Paul also adds "*or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours.*" In Romans 8, Paul uses those same exact words in the negative sense. Many of you know this passage, where Paul asks in verse 35, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" He then describes all the things we're tempted to believe might be able to separate us from our status as a child of God. Then do you know what he says in Romans 8:38-39? It almost seems like a mirror of this verse. "*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" You see, in light of Romans 8, do you know what Paul is saying here in 1 Corinthians 3:22? Paul is saying, "The world is yours."

What does that mean? He's saying, "You are not subject to the things that can happen to you in this world." In Christ, John 16:33 says, you have overcome the world. That means nothing can happen in this world that can threaten your status as a child of God. Listen, you can lose a job. You can lose a relationship. But you can't lose your status as a child of God. It's secure.

Life is yours. Do you know what that means? Your life is not held in fear. Not the ups and downs of disease. Not your emotions. It may be so hard for many of you right now. You may be under the weather, but you have to remember that you have eternal life if you're a follower of Jesus. No matter how hard life gets, no matter how hard the illness is, no matter how hard the pain is, you are a child of God, and guess what? You are secure.

Death is yours. What does that mean? You are not subject to death. You don't have to live in fear of death. "Oh death, where is your sting? Oh hell, where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). For the child of God, the moment we close our eyes in death, guess what? We open our eyes with our Savior. This is a beautiful thing. Death is not powerful enough to change your status. If you are a child of God, your status is secure.

It says here the present and the future are yours. You don't have to live in fear about what comes in the present and what happens in the future. As the future flows into the present, there's absolutely nothing that can come your way that can separate you from the love of God. Your status is secure.

I recently read a story about a man named Timothy Gray, a homeless man in Wyoming who passed away recently. What's interesting about Timothy Gray's life is that he never realized something special about himself. He never realized—even while he was homeless and begging for money—that he was actually a multi-millionaire. He didn't know he was a relative of the New York heiress Huguette Clark, and he stood to receive a piece of her \$300 million copper empire. As a matter of fact, he stood to receive \$19 million. Here was a man begging for money on the street, not realizing all he had.

Sadly, many of us are like that. Many of us are clamoring for status symbols—for money in the bank, for a promotion, for a relationship, for things to elevate ourselves in the eyes of other people so we'll

feel more secure—not realizing we have all the security we need in Christ. If you are a child of God, then you are a co-heir with Christ (Romans 8:12-17). In Christ, our souls are full.

Will you bow your heads with me? I want to ask everyone here, right where you are sitting, a simple question you may hear often here. Do you know for sure, if you were to die today, that you would spend eternity in heaven? Do you know that you actually have the status as a child of God? If you are unsure about that, if your heart does not rejoice in that, I want to give you the opportunity to receive God's gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ right now.

You can do that by repeating after me this simple prayer: "Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I know I've sinned against You. I know I'm separated from You by my sins. But today I believe Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins. Today, I put my faith and trust in Him. I ask You to forgive my sins and give me eternal life."

With every head still bowed and every eye closed, if you just prayed that prayer to God, I want to invite you to just raise your hand before the Lord, saying, "I made that decision right now. I'm putting my trust in Jesus Christ today." Praise God!

Father, we love You. Thank You so much for the cross. I thank You that You have saved us and have given us the status as Your children. That is enough for our longing souls. Father, teach us to live differently than our culture. Teach us not to have a culture within this church that is full of jealousy and envy and comparison. May we lift high Your name as we realize all we have in You and that it is enough. I pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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