

Sermon 11: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15: Be Careful How You Build

OUTLINE

The Master-Builder
The Foundation
The materials
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INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 5:10, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.' One day we are all going to have to give an account to God for all that we have done. For those who are not in Christ it will be an opening of the book of their lives and a long list of sin that we will be seen and held against them. Judgement day will be different for the believer, our eternal destiny is secure because Jesus has taken our judgement day, but there will still be a testing of our deeds. Paul drawing on that truth applies it here to the Corinthians problem of division here in 1 Cor. 3:10-17.

You will remember that Paul is writing deeply concerned about the man-following that the Corinthians are emulating from their culture, and how it is bringing divisions into the body of Christ. Paul has been rebuking the Corinthians for their immaturity, 3:1-4; has been explaining the nature of Christian ministry stressing how it is God who gives the increase and is not dependent upon man, 3:5-9; Paul introduced a metaphor comparing the church to a field, and ministers to farm hands; here in 10-15 Paul is going to use a second metaphor comparing the church to a building.

In this extended metaphor we will see how Paul compares himself to a master-builder; who lays a foundation which is Christ; and how any who build on this foundation be it teachers or any Christian who serves in the church, their works can be compared to various building materials. But this building is going to undergo the most intensive building inspection and be tested by fire, and the builders will gain reward or suffer loss. And to cap it all off Paul reminds us that we are in fact God's temple and that the building project we are all involved in is no minor construction but the very temple of God. Paul wants to wake us up to the fact that what we do in this life in the church matters, that we will have to give an account. He highlights the importance of what we do as we set out on the most important building venture in human history, the building of the temple of God. So our points are: the master-builder; the foundation; the materials; the inspection.

The master-builder

V10, '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.' Paul begins with an important emphasis on his ability to minister as he does as a gift of God's grace. This is a note he is going to strike again in this letter. We know that the Corinthians were filled with spiritual gifts, but it seems that this had gone to their heads and they were feeling superior to others and as a result mistreating their brethren. Paul reminds the Corinthians that anything we have is a gift of God, we have nothing except that which is

given to us from above. Any skill or effectiveness we have is God's grace not from us and therefore not a source of pride but gratitude.

Paul as an apostle talks about his role as one of the master-builder. This is literally *Sophos* *architekton*/wise architect. This was a recognizable role in the ancient world, much like our project manager would be today. One commentator 'notes that the term appears in temple inscriptions to refer to the supervisor of the day-to-day work of subcontractors. One ancient contract (*IG VII.3073*), which may be regarded as typical, outlines the responsibilities of the contractor: He shall work continually, hire enough skilled craftsmen, and is warned, along with any who take part in the work, against dealing fraudulently. He is also warned about damage to the existing temple or damage to materials and is required to repair anything that is destroyed. Payments and fines are clearly spelled out, and the work must be demonstrated to be worthy.'¹ Paul has drawn the discourse into familiar territory as we would do if we were talking about building code and health and safety.

Paul as an apostle distinguishes his role to any others who will follow him. As an apostle he has been given the role to lay the foundation for the NT church. When it comes to deciding what is the church; who are the officers who are to serve in the church; who gets to preach in church; what is the mission of the church, or any other question related to how the Church and household of God is to be built, the apostles have been given by God to lay the foundation. The apostle's writings have been preserved and inscripturated for us and we have the benefit for the ministry of the apostles to guide as in our building endeavours still today. For this reason we talk about *Sola Scriptura*. There are many who claim authority to tell the church what to do; there have been many who have claimed dreams and visions and prophecies. Many have tried to reinvent the church to meet the changing challenges of each generation. What we need to appreciate is that we are not the boss of the building site, the apostles are the master-builders; we are not the owner of the building, it is God's temple. Paul is underlining this fact to correct those who are imposing their will and ways upon the church in Corinth which is resulting in divisions. I won't expand on this now but simply to say that the church is not a blank canvas for us to come and express ourselves and any grand ideas that we might have. So many of the practices that we find in the modern church fail this test, we must ensure that we as fellow builders are following the instructions of the master-builder.

Now a major question is when Paul says that 'someone else is building upon it', whether he is envisaging only teachers, or if he is including all Christians as co-builders. I believe that Paul is primarily talking about other teachers like Apollos and probably the various home church leaders in Corinth who were likely the source of division, but Paul regularly expands the warning each one and everyone. In other portions of scripture Paul recognizes the role that every believer has in building the church 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:16 and so we will be able to apply what Paul says to ourselves individually. Each one of us is gifted to serve; each of us is part of body, the building; each one of us is either building up the church or not; some may even be doing terrible damage; we are all called to build for eternity, but some of the things we build will not last. We must keep this before us as we go through this section.

¹ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 114.

The foundation

V11, 'For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.' Paul employs the metaphor of the building in various ways, in Eph 2 he talks about how Christ is cornerstone and the apostles and prophets are part of the foundation, here he speaks of Christ alone as the foundation and his role of apostle as a master builder and not part of the structure. With an over-emphasis on the teacher; and trying to mix the wisdom of the world into the message, Paul emphasizes how Christ is the only foundation, just as Paul spoke only of Christ and Him crucified as the message he preached among them.

Jesus alone can be the only foundation for the church for there is no one else who can save. We are sinners and Christ alone is the sufficient sin bearer, He alone is qualified to offer Himself in full payment for our sins and be received by God. He alone is sinless, He alone has lived a sinless life and whose righteousness can be gifted to us; He alone is the God-man who can fully obey on our behalf; He alone is raised from the dead. The Corinthians were allowing worldly wisdom and distractions to detract from this foundation and allow things into the church that were dividing it. All other ground is sinking sand, any structure built on anything else will fail, it cannot save. This is why we need to make sure that the church is built upon the message of Christ and Him crucified, and how it is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone that we are saved. If we add anything to this, if we detract anything from this, we are undermining the whole structure of the church.

The materials

V12, 'Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.' We are all building as we serve in the church, but are we all building well? Are we building for eternity or merely for this life? Traditionally these 6 building materials have been seen as a token list, we must not over-specify what each refers to. The first three are good building materials that would survive a fire; the last three are lesser materials that are combustible. On the one hand Paul is referring to the teachings that the various teachers were using. Some were preaching Christ, others were using the wisdom of this world. Those saved by the truth would stand in the fire, but those who thought they were Christians, who thought they were part of the body of Christ but had been joined under false pretenses they will be lost as finally not truly believers but deceived. On the other hand the good deeds that we do are said to be rewarded. Paul goes on to talk about this.

The inspection

V13, '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.' We can pretend to be good and moral and upright in this life, but there is going to be a moment when everything will be put on display. You can fool your parents, your teachers, your siblings, you can hide sin, live in a world of sin in your heads, do things behind closed doors, but Paul tells us that one day it will all be revealed. Jesus speaking about that day with regard to religious hypocrisy said, Luke 12:2-3, 'Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.' ³Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.' 'Each one's work will become manifest.' Or as he puts in 4:5,

‘Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.’

Paul talks here about the ‘Day’ this is the day of the final judgement, or the day of our Lord Jesus Christ as he has already expressed it in 1:8. On this day everything will be tested by fire, 2 Pet. 3:7, ‘But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.’ Coming back to our metaphor, one of the most grueling test a building can face is a test of fire, it is one of the most destructive forces to face. In that final day when God removes everything from His creation that resists His will all that will be left are the people, the character and the good deeds we take into the new creation with us. V14, ‘If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.’

There have been some fanciful interpretations of this moment where some have tried to make out that the mansions in heaven are built by the lumber of our good works. There is a song called ‘That’s all the Lumber you sent.’ In this song “A man comes to the gates of heaven. Peter takes the new arrival to the house he built during his life. The man is excited as they pass by stone mansions. But as they continue, the houses keep getting smaller and smaller. They get to the man’s heavenly abode, and it is a two-room shack. Peter says he hopes the man is happy. The man can’t believe that is all there is. Then the chorus explains that the size of the house is based on the amount of lumber the man sent through his good works. The man can’t believe it. He asks Peter if that is what he deserves, and Peter tells him he should have done more. The man asks if Peter can send him back, assuring him he will do better. But it’s too late.”²

Paul also tells us that there will be loss on that day, v15, ‘If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.’ The Roman Catholic Church has taught that Paul is talking here about Purgatory when he talks about being saved through fire. Sam Storms makes a number of helpful observations to show this cannot be the case: ‘The text says nothing about believers suffering the temporal consequences for their sins in purgatory; they are not burned or purged in the fire. Their works are burned.’

This text does not refer to the consequence of sin but of the reward for service. The issue is not sin and its punishment but service and its reward. The “loss” one suffers is loss of reward for not having served Christ faithfully.

The “fire” does not purge an individual or his/her soul from sin but rather serves to reveal or disclose the quality of one’s works (see v. 13). The fire of purgatory is supposed to sanctify and change the soul of the believer to make him fit for heaven. But here the fire reveals or tests the quality of one’s works to determine what is and is not worthy of reward.

Nowhere does the passage say this occurs during the intermediate state.³ Paul is talking about what happens at the judgement not what happens after death.

I think we need to stop and allow the profundity of what Paul is saying to challenge us. Some of the things that we do now will last into eternity and some will not, how should that impact our lives now? Firstly, let us distinguish the

² — More Than Heaven: A Biblical Theological Argument for a Federal View of Glorification by T. Jeff Taylor
<https://a.co/75CUTMP>

³ <https://www.samstorms.org/all-articles/post/1-corinthians-3:15-and-purgatory> accessed 4/11/2024

good works of the Christian from good works that people rely on for salvation. We recognize that there is no deed that we can perform as Christians that is worthy of God's reward. There is no act that is truly perfect and free from weakness or fault. However we recognize that in Christ, our good works come to God wrapped in His righteousness as it were, freed from faults. When an act is done from a regenerate heart, in dependence upon the Spirit, according to the light of God's word, done in love for God or neighbor, in Christ, that act is a good deed.

So what are the good deeds that we can expect to endure? Here is a sampling of verses that talk about rewards and what they are for. You will notice rewards for suffering, serving, giving, piety, etc.

Matt. 5:11-12, 'Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

Matt. 6:3-4, 'But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

6:6, 'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

6:17-18, 'But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

6:19-21, "'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

10:41-42, 'The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.'

2 Cor. 9:6-7, 'The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

Luke 14:12-14, 'He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Heb. 6:10, 'For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.'

We must be careful to isolate obvious religious acts from everyday acts done to the glory of God. On that final day Rev. 19:7-8 tells us that as a bride adorns herself for her husband, the church will be dressed in the glory of her righteous deeds, 'Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.' What are

righteous deeds? Eating and drinking to the glory of God are righteous deeds. Putting in a hard days work Eph. 6:6-8, 'not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord.' Being obedient children and honoring your parents, 'in the Lord', which means as a believer by doing His will, not by obeying them if they order you to sin. Being a faithful spouse, being a good neighbor, being a faithful citizen. Using the spiritual gifts that God has given you to serve your brother and sister in Christ. There are so many ways we can do good deeds. The trouble is that we do not strive to love God with all our heart soul, mind and strength, we do not do things with all of our might, to the best of our ability, with diligence and integrity but take the path of least resistance. Unlike David we only offer the Lord what has cost us nothing and draw back from any Christlike sacrifice. When you weigh your deeds, I am not asking if they are perfect, I am asking are they done from the heart, to the glory of God, or are they mindless, bored, loveless, habitual, minimalistic, grudging deeds. Are you building with eternal materials that will outlast this age, or will you get into heaven with the smell of smoke on you?