

1 Corinthians 3:12-23 – “Building With The Right Materials”

Paul has been laying out for us that we are all works in progress. Some may be carnal Christians at the moment, but it's not to continue that way. The reason they've been acting carnally is because they've been dividing over who they're following and aligning with. There were party lines being drawn in the church and it was anything but a party at the church. They were encountering envy and strife among one another, and it was not what the Lord had for them.

Paul wanted them to see clearly that these leaders that they esteemed highly were nothing but tools for God to use to carry out His work (3:5-6). Whether one planted or another watered, they were all just servants of the Lord – and it's He that gives the increase and growth.

So Paul will conclude this theme in this chapter of correcting these unhealthy views of one another and bring us to that point of understanding 1) how we build upon Christ, 2) what we have through Christ, and 3) who we are in Christ.

1. How We Build Upon Christ – 3:12-15

3:12-13 - *Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.*

Paul said the foundation was laid for a healthy person to be able to grow up. That foundation was Jesus Christ. Now you can have a good foundation, but a very weak house if you build with the wrong materials. A house made of balsa wood, even though it's sitting on a solid concrete foundation, is not going to be very solid.

If we're adding to this foundation with materials that don't mix with who Jesus is, it's not going to stand.

Paul seems to differentiate between materials that will stand through the fire, and materials that are more temporary and will just be burned up. The gold, silver, and precious stones are materials that are lasting; they withstand the fire. Whereas wood, hay, and straw are completely combustible and will not last.

So what do the wood, hay, and straw represent? They represent the work we might do that has no eternal value to it. We may be looking like we're really

serving the Lord in an area of ministry, but if it's being done with wrong motives, it loses its eternal value.

- If you're singing in the worship team just so you can potentially land a record deal – boom, reward gone.
- If you're sharing the gospel only to get in arguments and show off your apologetic knowledge – boom, reward gone.
- If you're serving in the coffee ministry just so you can meet girls – boom, reward gone.

Anytime that we serve the Lord with a wrong heart or wrong motive, when it's done for us and not for Him, it weakens the work and doesn't mesh with the foundation we're to be building on. It loses its eternal reward.

The people Paul was contending with were looking very spiritual by how they were trying to align with these men of God, but their motives were off. It was all a show to promote themselves rather than promote Jesus.

Now I know you're all dying to get into what this Day and mysterious fire is all about.

All of our works are one day going to be tested. They're going to go through the fire. This I believe speaks of the day we stand before Jesus. But this isn't a fire to test us whether we qualify for heaven or not. That's a sin issue. And our sin was already judged on the cross when Jesus bore the fire of God's wrath for you and me so that we could be forgiven of our sin. This is not about salvation.

This Day speaks of the day we as believers stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ – or as Paul describes it – the Bema Seat, the seat of rewards.

There are three end time judgments talked about in the Bible:

- Matthew 25 talks about the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats. This is when the nations are judged after the tribulation. The righteous enter into eternal life, but the unrighteous into everlasting punishment.
- There's the Great White Throne Judgment in Revelation 20. This will come after the Millennium and will be a final sentencing for all those that have rebelled against God and did not receive His free gift of salvation in Jesus. Only unbelievers are at this one.
- Then there's the Judgment Seat of Christ, which Paul has in mind here. It's also called the Bema Seat and it's a place of rewards. Only believers are at this one.

- **2 Corinthians 5:9–10**, *"Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."*

The word **judgment** here is translated in the Greek as *bema*. This was the seat at the athletic games where athletes went to receive their reward. Corinth also had a platform like this where legal matters were judged and where athletes received their reward.

Everything we bring to the Lord in that day will be proven if it was done unto the Lord or not. Remember at the end of the first chapter Paul quoted the verse: *"He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."* Because glorying in anything else is building with **wood, hay, and straw**.

All that we do in life can have eternal reward if we do it unto Jesus and for Jesus! Obviously there are some things that's going to be hard to attach Jesus to it. Which then becomes clear it's not something we should really be wrapped up in.

But let's leave the judging to Jesus. Again, I don't always know the motives behind what people do, or how they're really living for Jesus. But this **fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is**.

- When we recall the vision of Jesus that John had in Revelation 1, we remember that Jesus had *eyes like a flame of fire* (Rev 1:14). I can just imagine one gaze from Jesus just purifies us and cleanses us to where whatever we're bringing with us, anything attached to us that doesn't glorify Jesus is just burned away with just one look from our Savior.

3:14-15 - If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Whatever we've done unto the Lord is going to have an eternal value to it. You will receive a reward for it. This should cause us to realize that we're to be doing a lot more than just trying to survive in this world and wait things out until we're with Jesus. Rather, we should be using our lives to bring glory to God. Not only does that have an effective work in the present, but it also stores up treasures in heaven!

- cf. Matt. 25 and the Parable of the Talents

Now, I can imagine there's going to be a lot of people standing before the Lord in that day ready to show all the great things they've done, and a lot of that work is going to go up in smoke because of how it was done and who it was done for. It may look very spiritual, but if it's not done for Jesus it won't pass the test. He will suffer loss. Again, not loss of salvation, but loss of reward. They'll enter into the glory of the Lord, but it will be through that fire. Apparently heaven will have a smoking section.

- C.T. Studd said it well: "Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."
- May we be busy about the Father's business, doing that which brings glory to Him, doing that which has eternal value, that's the life worth living.

2. What We Have Through Christ – 3:16-20

3:16 - *Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*

Paul is not speaking here about your body as an individual being the temple of God. He will in Ch. 6, but in this context, Paul is dealing with the church collectively.

- He uses the Greek word *naos* which speaks of the sanctuary consisting of the Holy place and the Holy of Holies, not the general area of the temple.
- The very place where the glory of the Lord dwelt is now dwelling among us! It's as though Paul is communicating that they don't have to follow after worldly wisdom or run after and follow various church leaders to have themselves secured in Christ. They have the very Spirit of God in them to lead them, empower them, and guide them in all truth!
- God is serious about the church. He doesn't want anything defiling it. The church at Corinth was doing just that in the way they were behaving and treating each other.

God has some strong words for such people...

3:17 - *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.*

If anyone tries to come into the church and build upon the solid foundation of Jesus with inferior materials, God will destroy him. That's some strong words right there.

But the idea is not so much destroy unto death, the word for destroy can also mean *defile* (the same Greek word is used for defile and destroy in this verse). The person that comes into the church with selfish motives, using the people, and elevating themselves, God will deal with them. There's not going to be a lot of room to continue that on when this is the very holy of holies of God. And you are this temple, so act accordingly.

3:18 - *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*

As we've been looking at the way we must build upon the foundation, we must continuously remind ourselves that it's not up to our own wisdom. We can employ great business models and strategies to build or grow the church but in the Lord's eyes it's just foolishness. Let us not be wise but be as a fool. This doesn't mean to be a lamebrain. I'm talking about not trusting in the world's ways but rather trusting in the Lord's ways.

So be foolish! Foolish in the world's eyes but wise in God's eyes as you live for and depend on Him! That's the wise way.

3:19-20 - *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"; ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.*

Paul quotes from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 to show that you can come with all your wisdom and think you're really going to accomplish something but you will see that it will be done in vain.

- This had special relevance to the false teachers that Paul had to contend with who were attempting to profit off the people for their own gain. No matter how spiritual they came across, no matter how religious they sounded, if it was not building on the solid foundation of Jesus, they would be caught in their own craftiness and found to be futile.

The Lord knows all that's going on. He knows your heart, your thoughts, your motives. Nothing is hidden before Him. Don't feel you need inferior things to build you up or make you strong. We have all we need in Christ.

3. Who We Are In Christ – 3:21-23

3:21-23 - *Therefore 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 things*

present or things to come—all are yours.²³ And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

The Corinthians were putting a lot of value in human wisdom and gravitated to those who exhibited it. We don't have to be putting any kind of emphasis on people. There's no one person that's going to be worthy of us boasting in them. All people that God calls are yours to be blessed by and encouraged through. We all belong to each other equally.

- "Perhaps we cannot help but have our personal preferences when it comes to the way different men minister the Word. But we must not permit our personal preferences to become divisive prejudices. In fact, the preacher I may enjoy the least may be the one I need the most!"¹

So whether it was Paul or Apollos, or whoever, they're just instruments in God's hand. They've all been given to us as a grace, or gift, of God. And He's the One that ultimately provides all the fruit of the work. Don't forget that, otherwise we begin to elevate man to an improper place (cf. 3:7).

How is **life or death** or **things to come** ours? I can take the life part, but the death part? What Paul seems to be saying is that because we are Christ's, we're in Him, and have received all things from Him. That means life abundantly today, and life eternally in a future day. We don't have to fear death. Death is actually just the entrance into that eternal life with God where we will enjoy Him forever!

Things to come might sound scary to some that are in the world and living for the world, but for us who are in Christ, we know He's unfolding His plans. And they're all moving along in perfect timing to that kingdom age. He's reigning in the present, but in a future day that reign will be seen throughout the world.

Life without Jesus goes from bad to worse. But life in Jesus goes from good to great.

So know what you have in Jesus today and who you are in Jesus today. Don't place unnecessary praise on others or praise on yourself. When He saved you and put His life in you, He was giving you all things. And He could do that because He is God's. It doesn't get any higher or greater than that! So let's be sure to glory in Him alone.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 581). Victor Books.