

Building a Life That Will Last

1 Corinthians 3

Read bridge collapse illustration. In any construction project, whether constructing a bridge or constructing a life, you have to make sure you're building with the right materials because the day will come when your construction is put to the test, and the test will reveal if you built with the right materials or not. As you live this life you are constructing for yourself a grand building that one day God will inspect to show you how well you built, whether you spent your life building something worthwhile or whether you wasted your time.

We will learn about how to build right today in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. I invite you to turn there now. 1 Corinthians is the seventh book in the New Testament. It comes after the four Gospels, Romans and Acts. 1 Corinthians chapter 3.

Allow me to share with you the main idea or the big picture about this passage and then we can plow into the details. I have written a main idea on your outline. Since you will have your life's work judged, don't rely on yourself or the world's wisdom, rather rely on God's Spirit within you.

I am going to begin with the idea of your future judgment which is in verses 10-15. Let's read those verses and then I will talk about them. Read verses 10-15.

Let's first understand how Paul is using the image of a building. Paul says in verse 10 that according to the grace that God has given him, Paul as a wise master builder laid a foundation but another is building upon it. Specifically Paul is referring to his planting the church at Corinth. God called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles and to establish churches and had given him grace or supernatural power to do so. Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Corinth and established the church. Now other church leaders were building on that foundation by leading the church. Since the church is God's church, anyone who leads and serves in it needs to be careful how he builds.

The foundation of the church is Jesus as Paul explained in verse 11. Jesus' death and resurrection are the basis upon which the church comes into existence. Jesus is the lord or master of the church and his disciples follow his teaching and instruction, so he is the foundation.

Now whether you do things in the power of the Holy Spirit or in the power of your own flesh determines the quality of your building materials. If you minister out of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that is with love, gentleness, goodness, peace, self-control, then you are building with gold, silver, or precious gems. If you serve out of your own power and strength with all the natural weaknesses of the flesh such as anger, impatience, insensitivity, etc. then you are building with wood, hay and straw.

In verse 13 Paul says that the day will reveal the quality of your work because fire will test it. Fire is a common figure for judgment, but don't make the mistake when you see the word, fire, in the Bible of thinking immediately that it is a reference to Hell. Most of the time it is not. It is not in this case. As you see in verses 14 and 15 this judgment leads to reward or possibly no reward but still being saved. So we are not talking about the Great White Throne Judgment or Hell. We are talking instead about the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The Bible teaches about a future judgment in which we will receive rewards for the good works we have done. 2 Corinthians 5:10 refers to the Judgment Seat of Christ where we receive rewards. It says, "Read." Romans 14:10-12 refers to the judgment as the Judgment Seat of God.

It says, "Read." I believe that 1 Corinthians 3 is describing the Judgment Seat where each of us will give account for how we have served and lived out our faith in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this judgment is to reward the saints. However, for those Christians who have lived carnal, fleshly lives and who have not contributed to God's work, they will still be saved but as through fire. They will be saved because we are not saved by our works, nevertheless their experience at the Judgment Seat will not be pleasant. They will have to answer to Jesus for their failure to live for him and to do the good works he planned for them. It will be an emotionally painful experience, comparable to escaping from a burning building. This is a proper place for the fear of the Lord. We don't fear losing our salvation or Hell, but you should rightly fear standing before Jesus with nothing to show him for how you thanked him for his mercy and grace to you.

What Paul is telling the Corinthians and you and me is that one day we will stand before God and he will call us to account for all the opportunities, gifts and abilities he gave us. You and I determine whether that will be a pleasant experience or an unpleasant one. God wants to reward you. He wants to lavish his generosity upon you, but you earn your rewards. Salvation is by grace, but rewards are according to your works.

The obvious question becomes: How do I know what is gold, silver and precious stones or wood, hay and stubble when it comes to how God evaluates good works? That is the subject of the rest of chapter 3.

Let's begin with the wood, hay and stubble of life. You build with wood, hay and stubble when you live according to the flesh rather than by the Spirit. Let's read verses 1-9. Read.

In verse 1 Paul says he could not communicate with the Corinthians as spiritual people but as to fleshly people, as to people who were still acting like they were newborn Christians. Paul should have reasonably expected by this time that most of the Corinthians would have grown into spiritually mature people, but unfortunately that was not the case.

Let's define some terms. Paul has already explained what he means by a spiritual person in chapter 2 verses 14-16 so let's read those verses. Read. The spiritual person is the opposite of the natural or unsaved person. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit whereas the spiritual person readily accepts and welcomes what the Spirit teaches them. The spiritual person treasures God's truth rather than viewing it as foolishness like the natural person does. The spiritual person has wisdom and discernment and so she appraises all things for how well they align with God's truth. A spiritual person has the mind of Christ. They not only have access to the way Jesus thinks through the Holy Spirit, but they actually do think like Jesus. So, the spiritual person is relying on the Holy Spirit to teach and guide them.

People of flesh are people who do not rely on the Holy Spirit but who rely on their own human ability, wisdom, and strength. The natural man or unsaved person always lives according to the flesh because that is all they have. They don't have the Holy Spirit living in them. A Christian can live according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit and that is apparently what most of the Corinthians were doing from what Paul writes.

How did Paul know the Corinthians were living according to the flesh? Paul provided a number of indicators. The first indicator of their fleshiness was their inability to grow in their understanding beyond the most basic truths of the Christian life. Paul says they were still drinking milk rather than solid food.

There is a passage in Hebrews 5:11-6:2 where the author of that book explains what milk drinking looks like in the spiritual realm. I've listed that passage on your outline. Let's read it. Read. Someone on a milk diet is dull of hearing. They just can't understand spiritual truth.

They don't go beyond the basic foundation blocks of Christianity such as you need to repent, you need to trust in God, there is a resurrection of the dead, there is eternal judgment or Hell. Milk means that you haven't gotten much further than the basic Gospel message. The spiritually mature are capable of using Scripture to discern good and evil. Those on milk have to have someone else tell them what is right and wrong, what is true and false.

It is perfectly understandable for a new believer to be on a milk diet. But if a number of years have passed and a Christian is still drinking milk and not eating more solid food, it means they are living by the flesh. Why? Well, the Holy Spirit is in them. The Holy Spirit wants to teach them, but they're not opening their Bibles. They're not asking the Holy Spirit to help them understand. They're sitting back waiting for some preacher or teacher to teach them, but they are making no effort themselves to sit under the teaching of the Holy Spirit in their own reading and study. When you rely only on some preacher or teacher to teach you God's word, that is living by the flesh, because the Holy Spirit wants to do more than that in your life. You're not listening to him because he wants to teach you directly. If you're not a great reader, then get yourself an audio Bible, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you through the spoken word and turn on the switch and listen.

Don't misunderstand me. I am all in favor of you listening to preachers and teachers, but you can't carry a preacher or teacher around in your hip pocket to help you evaluate the truth or falsehood in a work place conversation or something you heard on the TV. To become spiritually mature and able to discern truth and falsehood, good and evil, you have to become a student of the word yourself.

Another evidence of a fleshly life is jealousy and strife, verse 3. In fact, Paul lists a bunch of evidences of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 which is on your outline. You can read those evidences when you have time.

In verses 4-5 Paul provides an evidence of their jealousy and strife. Some were claiming to be of Paul. Some were claiming to be of Apollos. They were forming groups and finding their identity within that group rather than finding their identity with Christ. Paul goes on to say that he and Apollos were simply servants of God, each doing what God called them to do. Paul switches to an agricultural metaphor. I planted. Apollos watered, but the only one really accomplishing anything was God. He used our efforts to cause growth. We're just fellow workers. It's God's field. It's God's building.

One of the evidences of the flesh at work is that we try to establish our importance and worth by identifying ourselves with other people who we believe are important or significant. For example, when people name drop they are using a fleshly means to establish their significance and worth. "I was at the star athlete's party last night and he talked with me for much of the night." "The Governor asked my opinion on our immigration policy." "The President shook my hand."

At the District Conference last week I attended one of the workshops where Timothy Warren was the presenter. As we introduced ourselves I mentioned that I had taken Timothy's preaching class at Dallas Seminary and he commented that he recognized me. Now, I really didn't believe him because that class was about thirty years ago and I have changed since then, but still it felt good for him to say that he remembered me. I would have told all of you about that last Sunday but I knew no one here knows who Timothy Warren is and so I would gain no credibility from that story.

Of course, we all like to be remembered, to be appreciated and to be recognized especially by important people. However, most of us are not quite secure in our identity as a disciple of Christ

or as a child of God. We're always wondering whether we are really that important or valued, so if we can gain some recognition from a famous person or be associated with her or him, that makes us feel better about ourselves. If we can be linked with a superstar like Paul or Apollos or Billy Graham, we would feel more important. That's the flesh. I should be content and satisfied with just being a disciple of Christ. What is more important than that? Share Lucy story. You are in Christ. That's good enough.

Relying on the flesh, being jealous, forming factions, starting strife is all wood, hay, stubble.

Relying on the world's wisdom is also wood, hay and stubble. Let's read verses 18-23. Read. If you think you are wise as measured by the wisdom of this world, then you need to become foolish according to the world's way of thinking, because that is the path to true wisdom.

People will think you are absolutely foolish to give ten percent or more of your money away to the church or to religious causes when you could have been investing that money. Your schoolmates will think you are absolutely nuts when you decline the head cheerleader's invitation to come to a drinking party at her house. The people at work will think you have lost your mind when you refuse to fast-track at the company so that you will have time to be your kids and attend their events. Your fellow University students will shake their heads when you critique a modern philosophy using Biblical arguments. By choosing the wisdom of God, you will look foolish to the world.

Boasting in men or in things is part of worldly wisdom, especially if you think boasting in them will also somehow make you look smarter, more important, or more significant. The most important thing about you, the most significant thing about you is that you belong to Jesus. You are his. There is nothing more important than that. Boast in the Lord, that he is your lord.

Whenever you try to apply worldly wisdom to the things of God, that is an example of building with wood, hay, and stubble. The world says there should be no distinctions between men and women in the roles they play in life. But that worldly wisdom does not match the Bible's directions for the church and the family. People also think churches should be run by pure democracies, but there is nowhere in the Bible any examples of God leading through the majority of people. He always led by a single leader or by a group of leaders.

I read recently where Harvard disbanded a Christian group on campus because one of the female leaders began a lesbian relationship and the student leaders removed her as a small group leader. Harvard argued that because their leadership was not open to everyone regardless of sexual lifestyles, they could no longer operate on campus. It was irrelevant to the Harvard officials that the Christians forbade leadership to anyone engaging in sex outside of marriage, whether heterosexual or homosexual. That is an example of the world imposing worldly wisdom on Christians. If the Christian leaders had succumbed to the Harvard Administration, they would have been building with wood, hay, and stubble.

Another area in which we need to beware of incorporating worldly wisdom into the church is in the area of politics from either the perspective of the left or the right. It is real easy to adopt a political policy as a Biblical position when oftentimes the situation is much more complicated and not so easily discerned as to what the Biblical position is.

Employing worldly wisdom is building with wood, hay and stubble.

So, how do you build with gold, silver, and precious gems? I have already alluded to the answer. When you rely on God's Spirit within you for your motive, for your wisdom, and for your power, then you are building with gold, silver, and precious stones. Look at verses 16-17. Read.

If you have believed in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit lives within you and you have access to the thoughts of God, the wisdom of God, the power of God. All that is true, but Paul actually means something more than that in verse 16. Paul is not using the singular you in that verses. He is using the plural “you.” Do you all not know that you all are the temple of God and that the Holy Spirit dwells in all of you? He is referring to the whole Corinthian church when he says you all are the temple of God. When he refers to destroying the temple of God in verse 17 he is referring in the context to how divisions, jealousies and strifes are destroying God’s holy temple, the church at Corinth.

Significantly, verse 17 switches to singular pronouns. If anyone of you, singular, destroys the temple of God, God destroys this one, singular. You and I cannot change anyone else. We can only change ourselves. I can’t make anyone else to rely on the Holy Spirit or follow his wisdom. I can only make sure I rely on the Holy Spirit and follow his wisdom. For a church to rely on the Holy Spirit requires that each individual in the church rely on the Holy Spirit. So, even though Paul is addressing the whole church in verse 16, each individual themselves must make the choice not to rely on their own abilities but to rely on the Holy Spirit. And according to verse 17 each individual that destroys or damages God’s temple, God in turn destroys or damages him.

What does he mean by destroy? The Greek word can mean destroy or it can mean ruin or corrupt. If Paul is referring to false teachers who sow division in the church he could actually mean destroy in the sense of eternal destruction. If he is referring to carnal Christians who are causing strife and division he could be referring to destroy in the sense of physically killing them, taking them to Heaven prematurely. He could refer to ruining them in the sense of allowing something in this life to damage them such as giving demons permission to attack them, inflicting them with disease or physical maladies or whatever. I suspect Paul used a broad term to allow all these possibilities.

What you should walk away with is the recognition that God comes down pretty severely on someone who harms or damages a whole church. It is one thing to sin against one or two Christians. It is quite another thing to do damage to a whole body of believers.

However, let’s close with the positive. When you ask the Holy Spirit for help and you try to consciously rely on him, then he builds into your actions and your life his fruit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control. Throughout the day have a running conversation with the Holy Spirit. If you are about to take a test, ask him for help. If you are about to confront a friend about something they said about you behind your back, ask the Holy Spirit to help you gently confront them. If you are losing patience with a child or a teenager, send up a call for help from the Holy Spirit. If you have had about all you can take from your boss, ask the Holy Spirit for more grace to respond like Jesus would. This is called, practicing the presence of God. Get into the habit of consciously depending on him.

Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you when you read the Scriptures. Ask him for wisdom when you need to make a difficult decision. When you are feeling kind of worthless or like a failure ask him to remind you of who you are in Christ. When you feel fearful about the future, tell him that, and ask him to comfort you. The Scripture calls the Holy Spirit the comforter, so ask him for comfort.

When you do these things and then try to serve and help others, he helps you build with gold, silver, and precious gems. Then you will look forward to the day when you stand before Jesus to give an account of how you lived your life and served him and his church. No doubt he will then say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Let’s pray.