

1 Corinthians 3:9-17 **A Sermon**

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We are continuing this morning in our study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, focusing our attention on chapter 3, verses 9-17. So far, we have seen how in this letter Paul is doing two main things: 1) Responding to situations and problems he has heard about through various sources and, 2) Responding to questions which the Corinthians have asked him. We are still very much in the first part of the letter - where Paul is responding to problems he has heard about, starting with the problem of division within the church.

Part of Paul's response to the factions and divisions that were forming in Corinth was to try and address some of the wrong-headed thinking that lay behind their struggles. After dealing fairly extensively with the subject of wisdom (1:18-3:4), Paul then turns his energies toward addressing things having to do with leaders and ministry and how one should and should not think about these things in God's church. Two weeks ago, we had our first look at that in chapter 3:5-9 and we saw that, "God's servants are meant to be useful tools through whose efforts He brings His people, firstly, to salvation, and then onto maturity in the Lord."

In the passage before us this week, Paul continues to look at the subject of leaders and ministry, always with the ultimate goal of healing their divisions and promoting greater unity in the Corinthian Church.

That's the introduction, before we go any further, let's pray.

The church, says Paul, is like a building that is under construction. If you were here two weeks ago then you may remember that Paul used a different image just prior to this - an agricultural image - to describe the relationship between leaders and congregations. Paul said he was a planter and that Apollos was a waterer and that the Corinthian congregation was the field in which they worked. At the end of the day, however, we saw that only God could make anything grow, i.e., only God could make the "planting" ministry of Paul fruitful, only God could make anything useful come of Apollos' "watering" ministry.

Well, at the very end of that section, in verse 9, Paul shifted the image from an agricultural one to an architectural one - no longer talking about fields but, instead, talking about buildings. The Corinthian Church, says Paul, is like a building that is under construction. In this particular building, Paul reminds them, the foundation has already been laid - referring, in the first instance, to the historical fact that it was through his preaching of Christ that the first people responded to the Gospel and thus the Church came into being - "it was founded"

- through Paul's ministry.

Yet, even though Paul did "lay" a foundation, and that is how things got started in Corinth, there is a sense in which Paul was not so much laying a foundation as he was proclaiming and informing them about a foundation that was already in place - as verse 11 indicates - "...no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid - or - which is already laid" as the NIV puts it. So, what's the passage saying?

Did Paul lay a foundation or not? Well, it's a little of both. You see, the deeper truth is that long before Paul did any foundation work in Corinth, God Himself had first determined that a foundation would be laid by his eternal decree, as passages like Ephesians 1:3-10 make clear. Then, in space and time, and on the basis of his eternal decree, God brought to pass that which he had foreordained and, as a result, sent his Son into the world to become the atoning sacrifice for his people - that is, to be the one who would make his people right with God. Still later on, and still according to God's decree, he then sent the Apostle Paul as the messenger of what Christ had done to the Corinthian people.

So, as Paul announced what God had done through Jesus, the foundation which God had laid became presently, actually, existentially, the foundation for the church in Corinth, as one by one, people responded to the Gospel and then came together to be the church, founded on Jesus Christ.

Now you may say, "Okay, Lindsay, why are you laboring this point? Why are you going on about this?" And the reason is simply this: You need to be clear on the fact that the bedrock foundation of the church is not simply a bare truth that someone proclaims - as if the church is just some sort of theological edifice - as if it is just built on a collection of ideas. When Paul blew into town and starting teaching about "Christ and Him crucified" - Yes, those things are absolutely true but the foundation of the Church is not merely a collection of truths but is in fact the person of Christ himself. At the very heart of the Church is not just some idea or collection of ideas but a person - the Lord Jesus Christ - through whom God invaded our world, and changed it, forever.

As Paul will take pains to show in chapter 15 of this letter, if at the end of the day, all we have are a bunch of ideas that seem to fit together and work out fairly consistently and which have a proven track record of being really useful for people - if all we have is that and not a Real person and Real events and a Real God coming down to die a Real Death and Really Rise again - if there isn't a person at the heart of this thing - then we are, of all people, most to be pitied.

Further, when we forget that there is a person at the heart of this thing, if it's just a lot of impersonal ideas, then the structure that gets built is an impersonal structure that has every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed and is cold and clinical and lifeless and suffocating. When we forget that there is a person at the heart of

this thing, then we can approach Christianity as if its only about mastering a set of correct doctrines and developing the right mindset about everything under the sun RATHER THAN getting to know and living in relationship with a person - the Lord of the Universe.

So, it is important for us to establish that the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ which, of course, entails all sorts of theological truths about his life and death, but it is always truth that is attached to and embodied in the PERSON of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He IS the foundation upon which the Church is built.

Well, in addition to having a foundation, God's Church, following the building analogy, also has a superstructure - that which is built upon the foundation - the frame, the roof, the walls, windows and doors.

Now, when Paul talks about building upon the foundation, when he talks about building the superstructure, he is, of course, referring to the ministry of other people who have come into the church after him and who, by their teaching and working amongst the Corinthians, are building upon the foundation which has already been laid. Now, you may wonder if Paul is talking here about the ministry of Apollos but I don't think that's very likely since, as commentators have noted, in every other instance when he refers to Apollos he has done so directly.

By contrast, this passage is full of lots of indefinite and indirect references - using words like "someone", "each one", "no one", and "anyone"- and so with these indefinite references Paul seems to be referring to other people who are currently playing some sort of leadership role in the Corinthian congregation. Most likely, he is referring, at least partially, to the same people we have already heard about who were seeking an alleged "deeper" wisdom that went beyond the Cross of Christ do you remember that from our look at earlier passages?

Well, to these people, and indeed to all who have some sort of ministry in Corinth, Paul says - take care how you build. And the references here are, in the first instance at least, certainly to the kinds of things that they are teaching. The implications are definitely theological. As one commentator says about this passage (Calvin):

the gold, stones, wood, hay and straw are doctrine that is built on the foundation of Christ.. By "gold and precious stones" Paul means doctrine that is in accord with the foundation and is intrinsically related to the truth of Christ and him crucified AND which does not contradict that truth in any way. By "wood, hay and straw" he means doctrine that is not answerable to Christ, doctrine that is out of step with a cross-centered theology, and which is forged in men's brains and is then thrust upon others as if it were an oracle of God.

So the implications here are that those who teach God's people - whether they are Pastors, Youth Ministers, Campus Ministers, Sunday School Teachers, Counselors, or Parents - those who teach God's people - in whatever capacity - need to be very careful to make sure that the things that they teach are in accordance with the foundation - which is Christ. The truth that is passed on needs to be truth which is consistent with the Gospel and which promotes and furthers the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, when Paul talks about people being careful how they build, the implications are certainly theological, but, as we have already seen this morning, they are not merely theological. Just as AT the foundation of the Church we find there is a person - the Lord Jesus Christ - likewise, the superstructure of the church is also not merely a collection of doctrines - it is not merely a theological educe but is also a personal structure. Listen to the words of the Apostle Peter:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Peter says that the stones which are formed above the foundation are "living stones" - i.e., the men and women who, together, form and become the church, the Body of Christ.

So, with that in mind, Paul wants all who exercise some ministry and leadership in Corinth to be careful how they build, not just because it is important that they get their theology right - which it certainly is - but more significantly because in their ministry they are not building with inanimate matter but with flesh and bone - with real people - people who will take the things that they teach and embrace them and own them and believe them and begin to make decisions - often big decisions - based upon these things. They are messing with people's lives - as all good ministry does and as such they are to be careful how they teach and minister because it is personal and its effects are personal and all that they do - for good or ill - will be incarnated in, and affect the lives of individual people and that, collectively, will produce a certain character within the local church.

The church, says Paul, is like a building under construction. And the construction of that building, as we have already seen, is not the work of a single person, but is in fact a team effort. "I laid a foundation and someone else is building upon it". Paul's words indicate his awareness of, and indeed his welcoming of the fact that the work of the ministry is a coordinated effort as various persons use their gifts to build up the church. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about this very thing:

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into

him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Paul shows in his letter to the Ephesians, as he does here in the Corinthian letter, that he understands the work of the ministry to be a team effort and that many people are involved and ought to be involved in the building up of God's people. Paul is okay with that, what he is concerned about, however, is those who are building in a way which is inconsistent with the foundation. To be sure, not all of these people are necessarily intending to bring harm to the church, but the fact remains that some, even with good intention, were lacking in knowledge and had a shallow grasp of the truth and thus were still building with inferior materials - that is, teaching things which were inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, as such, things which were not ultimately going to be that which builds up the church.

Of course, alongside these well-intentioned, but misguided teachers, there were also some whose motives were NOT so good and who were undermining the church. These are the ones to whom Paul delivers the stinging warning of verses 16 and 17:

Do you not know that you (you plural - "y'all) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Now, that changes the way you READ these verses, doesn't it? You see, while these verses are often misread as ones which are talking to individual Christians and warning them about how they treat their bodies - the truth is that that sort of interpretation has nothing to do with what these verses are saying and completely ignores the context. As Gordon Fee points out,

...there is not even the slightest hint that Paul is referring here to how each individual Christian builds his or her life on Christ - which is how these words are almost always treated in evangelical circles. People will say things like, "I don't smoke" or "I don't drink" or "I don't do something" - Why? Because "...my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, can I gently suggest that that is an illegitimate use of this passage. So, if you are looking for a passage to justify your participation or non-participation in some particular activity, you will have to use another passage of Scripture to do it. I digress.

Again, these words are NOT addressed randomly to individual Christians but

instead to Christian leaders - to all those whose ministry affects others in the body - the corporate Body of Christ. Some of these leaders, as we have seen, were probably well-intentioned but still misguided and needed to re-examine how they were building on the foundation which Paul laid. But others were NOT so well intentioned, and had a definite agenda which was leading people away from Christ, and thus they were actively destroying God's temple - i.e., the local church in Corinth - As a result, these people, Paul says, were lining themselves up to receive the judgment of God.

The church is a building under construction and that construction is an on-going project requiring a team effort. And, as has already been said, not all who build the church, build well. Just because something is done "in Jesus' name" is not a guarantee that it is something that is of any ultimate worth. Just because something looks impressive in this world and by this world's standards, is no indicator of true value.

Now, later on in this letter, Paul will come back to this idea in the very familiar passage of 1 Corinthians 13, where he writes:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

People can do all sorts of things, even amazing things, in God's name but in the end, when the motives of the heart are made plain, it may mean absolutely nothing and it may count for nothing. So, in a few more chapters, Paul will be addressing this issue further, but we see the seeds of those ideas already here in chapter 3. Clearly, not all ministry is the same, not everything has the same quality and worth or results in the same evaluation.

Now one of the things that illustrates this, in this passage, are the differing materials that are described in Paul's building metaphor. He talks about people building on the Christ Foundation with things like gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - and in so doing describes a sort of sliding scale of value. Gold, silver and precious stones are the kinds of things that went into the construction of temples - i.e., places which represented the dwelling place of God. Wood, hay and straw were the construction materials that you would use on your basic, ordinary house - i.e., a place that is NOT ordinarily considered to be the dwelling place of God.

Therefore,, with these kinds of images, Paul is simply making the point that the ministry of differing leaders can vary a great deal in its actual quality and worth. Some ministry is like gold, silver and precious stones and is that which is fitting

for a people that - together - are the dwelling place of God. Other ministry is more like wood, hay, and straw - that which is inferior in quality and which is NOT fitting for use in God's building - God's church. So, Paul says that not all who build, build well. And the determination as to whether a person HAS built poorly or well is something which Paul assures the Corinthians will happen at a definite time and with definite consequences (read vs13-17).

Now there are several things that need to be said here. For starters, and as we have already seen, you need to remember that these words are NOT directed so much at the church in general as they are at those who lead and ministry within churches. And so the implications of this are not just for paid staff people but for everyone who is directly involved in building up the Body of Christ through some specific ministry - which includes, as I said before, pastors, Bible Study Teachers, youth pastors, counselors, Sunday School Teachers, Vacation Bible School Leaders, Discussion Group leaders, Mentors, Disciplers, Parents, etc.... For all those people, the quality and usefulness and faithfulness of the ministry that was carried out is the thing which will come under God's scrutiny in the end. It will be "revealed" or "tested" by fire.

Now, as I'm sure you already know, we are not to take these words to mean that there will literally be a big bonfire and all of the "works" that we did will somehow be quantified and transformed into concrete substances like gold and stones and wood and then all of these things will actually be thrown into a fire to be tested. Don't get carried away with the imagery here. The point of the "fire" imagery is simply to say that just as the illustrative materials mentioned in the passage - gold, silver, wood, hay, etc - would react differently to fire - some being burnt up and some being unharmed - likewise so will the various ministries and efforts of different leaders (incarnated in the lives of people affected BY those ministries) either stand up or they will not as all people are made to come before the judgment seat of Christ.

And please notice that it is the Lord who is doing the evaluating here. Verse 13 talks about "the DAY" when all this will happen and you need to know that whenever the New Testament talks about "THE day" alongside images of fire and judgment, it is always referring to the Second Coming - the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which will be the time when all things are judged and all the books are balanced. And so, it is the Lord who is going to be doing the evaluating.

Which means that, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if the world has placed great esteem upon a particular leader, it doesn't even matter if the church has held a particular leader's ministry in great esteem because the ambition of men and women is blind, and the praise of men and women is blind, and the motives and intentions of the heart are hidden from all except God. What matters is the judgment of God, as Paul will elaborate on in chapter 4.

And when the Lord DOES make that determination, when the efforts of all those

who in some capacity have ministered among the Body of Christ are finally evaluated, there will be one of several consequences that result - one of those consequences applies to those who may operate within the church but are ultimately shown to be unbelievers and false prophets.

The other two consequences apply to people who are genuine believers. For those who are shown to be unbelievers and whose leadership and ministry ultimately tore down the people of God, for them the consequence, as we have already seen, will be judgment and destruction. Along these lines, listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ON that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord" did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

In keeping with Jesus' own words, Paul echoes a similar teaching here, sounding a strong warning to all those who, by all external appearances, might have seemed to be serving the Lord and advancing the Kingdom but who in actual fact will be shown to have done nothing of the sort and, in fact, will be shown to have caused confusion, chaos and destruction in the Body of Christ.

That is one consequence. The other two consequences are received by those who are genuine believers and not enemies of the faith, not wolves in sheep's clothing. Nevertheless even though they might have shared a common faith, their leadership and ministry were not the same, their motives were not the same, the degree to which their teaching conformed to Christ's Foundation was not the same - and the result is that they will not receive the same treatment when their various ministries are evaluated by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some will "receive a reward". Now, as Gordon Fee points out, there is no warrant in this passage to go much beyond that statement as Paul does not bother to elaborate on what he means by that at this stage. I think one of the primary places where you would look at the subject of reward in some detail is in Matthew 6. But let it suffice to say that these words may mean nothing more than this: that the "reward" mentioned in verse 14 is simply the joy of seeing and knowing that one's efforts for the Lord have endured the test and were useful in furthering God's glory and Kingdom. The promotion of the Loved One is the highest reward for the One who loves. And if the glory of God is being promoted through those to whom a leader has ministered, then so much the better.

And, along the same lines, if that is how we might think about the concept of reward then the "loss" that gets mentioned here may well be the sorrow and

sadness at seeing so much of one's ministry and work to be shown up as the inferior, unhelpful, and misguided work that it was, and to see the personal consequences of that as it impacted on the lives of people, who now stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

So, without going into great detail on this subject, we nevertheless can say that the rewards, or the experiencing of loss - both - are according to a person's labor (1 Cor. 3:8) and yet (if rewards) are still always only a consequence of grace, and (if loss) only a result of justice. Further, we know that these differing consequences will not be received in this life, but in the next and thus - as Calvin notes - are things which help to sustain and propel us forward in our sinfulness and weakness so that we do not become distracted by the shallow, plastic trinkets of this age and give ourselves to the service of Christ and Gospel, while we await and place our hope in the blessings of the age to come.

Therefore,, at the end of the day, the passage is warning and reminding the congregation and the present leaders in Corinth that present success is not the true indicator of ultimate worth. Rather, the only ministry that will mean anything in the end, is not that which receives the applause of men and women but rather is that which will stand up to the judgment of God and which is consistent with the foundation - which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

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