

1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15

INTRODUCTION

This section of Paul's letter is linked with the previous passage by the idea of the believer's reward. Paul said in verse 8 that each person will be rewarded according to their labour for the Lord. He is highlighting the fact that each believer has a task to perform and that contributes to the whole work of God, as we work together God's purpose is being fulfilled.

However no one misses out just because their task does not seem as important as others. Each man and woman is rewarded not according to his or her task but according to his or her labour for the Lord for we are all God's fellow workers.

Now the fact that God rewards his people for their labour ought to be one of the greatest motivating factors in the lives of his people. Our ultimate motivating factor is the glory of God but we must not forget that our work is seen by the Lord and therefore we ought to give our best to him knowing that ultimately God rewards his people for their labour and those rewards will glorify God ultimately.

Paul uses the picture of building here to teach some important lessons about doing God's work.

1. AN EXPERT BUILDER MUST LAY THE FOUNDATION (v 10-11)

When Paul arrived in Corinth there was no church so Paul was designated the task by God to lay the foundation and he was to do so carefully like an expert builder laying the foundation for a building. The word translated 'expert builder' is one word in Greek and it is the term from which we get our word architect but the word in Paul's day meant not just designer but also builder.

Paul was an apostle and therefore as an apostle Paul was to lay the foundation for the church. He was to plant churches and instruct them in the great truths of the Scriptures and then he was to appoint elders who carried on the building process. But Paul is not boasting here for he clearly tells us that he is only able to lay the foundation because of the grace given to him by God to fulfil such a task.

The fact that Paul was an expert builder was not because of Paul's great skills as an apostle it was simply because God enabled him by his grace to do so. As Paul entered Corinth he had no ability to cause anyone to listen to him or to turn from their sin to faith in Christ. God alone had the power to do so but God enabled Paul to preach the gospel effectively and he enabled sinners to turn to Him. If any preacher sees people coming to Christ if any church is planted, it is because of God and his power and grace and not because of the preacher. Remember what we said last time that we are only instruments in God's hands.

However in the 18 months that Paul ministered in Corinth (Acts 18:11) Paul had faithfully preached the gospel and instructed the converts in the things of God. He had proven himself to be an expert builder. The idea behind the word expert is that of being wise. Again Paul is thinking about God's wisdom rather than the false wisdom that was loved in Corinth. Paul had built with great spiritual wisdom and with great skill.

He had a plan for building the church at Corinth; he went to the synagogue first (Acts 18:1-4). He knew that being a Jew, the people would give him a hearing and if God in his grace converted some then they could help him to reach the Gentiles of the town. So Paul was wise not only in his message, which we will see, was the wisdom of God but also he was wise in the way he went about his task. You see every expert builder has a plan, a strategy for laying the foundations of a building and he will carry that plan through so that the foundation is laid correctly.

Now there is a great lesson here for churches today. God wants us to be his instruments in building his church but we must be wise in how we do it. We must think clearly about the best biblical strategy for reaching people in our community. We want to lay the foundation carefully in people's lives by instructing them on the core truths of the bible. But we also want to build upon that foundation and we need to be wise in how we do it.

We don't want to compromise the truth of the gospel but we need to think carefully about how best to reach our community with the gospel and how best to instruct new converts in the basic truths of the gospel. There is no excuse in churches for lack of planning and lack of preparation; we must think and apply our thinking into our evangelism so that we are seeking under God to reach the people with the gospel in our locality.

We must use methods that are God honouring but also effective in reaching people. There are lots of churches who are God honouring in that they declare clearly the gospel. But I feel sometimes that they fall down in the way that they seek to reach people with that gospel. The methods used in evangelism must enhance the gospel not hinder it, but it also must be an effective method.

There is no point in being a gospel preaching church if we are not reaching people with the gospel because the methods we use are off putting for people. We all must be expert builders, wise builders as God enables us by his grace.

But if we are going to be expert builders then we need to be clear what this foundation that Paul laid was. Paul did not design the foundation he was God's instrument to lay the foundation, which is Jesus Christ (v 11). Paul's task was to present Christ to the Corinthians to instruct them about his person and his work and to urge them to trust in Him. His preaching and teaching were to be Christ centred and every doctrine that he presented was to be focused upon Christ.

Christ is the foundation of our Church for no one can become a Christian unless they come to Christ. No one can be a member of his church unless they know who Christ is and what Christ has done for them. Christ is the foundation that we build upon in this church. He is the One that we present to people and we call people to repent and place their faith in him. He is the One that we build upon and therefore all that we do and think and say must be Christ centred. We are not presenting the gospel unless we present Christ to people; the foundation will never be laid in their lives unless Christ is preached to them and unless they come to embrace him.

There are religious organisations that try to build their church through a moral and ethical code or through traditions of a church or through some other means. But those foundations will not stand the test of time the church is to present Christ as the one to whom sinners must come to for salvation.

Now Paul knew that as an apostle he was to lay the foundation and once that had been laid he was to move on and lay the foundation somewhere else. He knew that others would build upon the foundation, which was laid. That is why Paul and the apostles appointed elders in the church they were to continue building upon what was laid.

Now as with any building the foundation is the most important part, you cannot build until and unless the foundation has been laid. But the foundation is not the whole building you must build upon it so that the building can be completed. Paul knew that other people were building on the foundation that he laid in Corinth. However he was concerned that the builders should be very careful how they build. It's no good having a good and solid foundation if the rest of the building work is shabby and of inferior quality.

Now this is a warning to us all but in particular to those of us who teach and preach. We must make sure that what we teach is true, accurate and biblical otherwise we could be making the building of God's church unstable. This is why being an Elder in God's church carries an awesome responsibility this is why those who teach are judged more strictly (James 3:1). We must build up the lives of God's people and that means building with God's truth.

This is why incorrect doctrine is ultimately harmful to God's church, preachers must be loving enough to expose error and to show graciously how such error will harm God's church, God's building. But ultimately we are all builders for our lives and our words teach others in the church all the time. If we are careless about the things of God then that is teaching others that such things are not all that important.

If we are inconsistent in our lifestyle then that is teaching others that it does not matter if you do not practise what you know to be true. We must all ask ourselves what am I teaching others in this church by my words beliefs and lifestyle? I trust that each one of us will be careful how we build so that we will not make God's building unstable.

2. THE MATERIALS TO BE USED IN THE BUILDING WORK (v 12)

No Christian needs to worry about the foundation of their faith for that foundation is the Lord Jesus; it is secure stable and perfect. However every Christian ought to be concerned with the materials we use to build upon this foundation of Jesus Christ. There is only one foundation but there are many types of materials for erecting the spiritual building.

We all are constantly building upon our foundation; we are all building some sort of life or some sort of church. We might be building a beautiful structure with the best materials or some sort of hovel with the poorest materials we can use. We may intentionally be building or we may be building by neglect but we are all building something.

If you look at church history and look around today at those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and at the various churches then we will see that there are vast differences between professing Christians and churches. There are some who are glorifying God by their worship and lives and there are others who seem to stumble from one spiritual crisis to another and seem to really make little headway along the Christian pathway.

The materials listed in verse 12 are in two categories. The first category lists gold silver and costly stones. These materials clearly represent high quality materials. The second category wood hay and straw clearly represents inferior materials. But what does it all mean? Well it is all about building on the foundation of Jesus Christ. There are some Christians and churches who are doctrinally sound they understand and believe the great doctrines of the bible.

They also seek under God to apply those doctrines in their own lives and in the life of their church. They seek as a consequence to serve their Master wholeheartedly with love for Christ and others. They are diligent in using the means of grace to encourage and strengthen their faith in Christ and to build upon their foundation. They are faithful in their walk with God, they are careful in their study of God's word and they are busy using the gifts granted to them by the Lord. These types of Christians and churches are like gold silver and costly stones because they are building on the foundation of Christ using the very best materials. However there are sadly Christians and churches that are the very opposite.

They are confused doctrinally believing false doctrines and as a result they live inconsistent lives because they are applying wrong doctrines into their lives and their churches. They are less than wholehearted in their service for Christ and they say they love others but there is little evidence in

their lives. Such people are careless with the things of God being neglectful of the means of grace and failing to be diligent in the study of God's word and using the gifts granted to them.

I hope you can see that I have painted a picture of two extremes; some that are like gold silver and costly stones and some Christians and churches that are like wood hay and straw. But there are many Christians who are in between these two extremes We all need to ask God to show us which materials we are using I suspect there are times when we use them all. There are times when we are keen and on fire for God and are therefore diligent and faithful. But there are other times when we are spiritually cold and indifferent and are therefore careless about the materials that we use to build on our great foundation.

Paul's point is that we are to build using the best materials and we are not to be content with inferior materials. This means that we must strive for sound doctrine; we must study God's work diligently and seek God's help to come to a clear understanding of Christian doctrine. There are sadly far too many Christians and churches that do not know what they believe and are content with that. They say "I am a practical Christian; I don't concern myself with doctrine too much". The truth is that you will never be a practical Christian unless you know what the bible says and what you ought to believe. Because what we believe affects the way we live and the way we conduct ourselves as a church. If we are to use the best materials for building upon our foundation of Jesus Christ then we must put into practise what we believe.

This is obvious but sometimes churches and Christians are sound doctrinally but they never seem to apply what they believe. They believe that the world is lost and needs to be saved but yet they do not evangelise or witness to the truth of the Bible. They believe that they should give as the Lord has blessed them yet they give so little of their time, gifts and finance to the Lord and his work through the church.

We all need to ask God to give us the grace and determination to use the best materials that are available to us, so that we will carefully build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

3. THE REASON WHY WE SHOULD USE THE BEST MATERIALS FOR BUILDING (vs. 13-15)

A new building is checked before it is occupied or used. We have building regulations that tell us that the building work must be done to a certain standard and with the right materials. Well in the spiritual realm it is just the same.

The Lord has building regulations, he expects us as Christians and as a church to build using the right materials, the best materials. Just as a building inspector will inspect a building before permission is given for it to be used so the Lord is the building inspector of his work. Paul tells us that He will inspect our building on the day when he returns as Judge. On that day every believer will be tested as to the quality of our building work. Fire is used here as a symbol of testing the standard of our building.

If we have built using wood hay and straw then it is clear that our building work is going to be exposed for what it is, shabby and careless. However if we have built using gold, silver and costly stones then our building work will be seen for what it is, something that endures and lasts.

The result of this testing by fire will be rewarded (v 14). If our building proves to be of sufficient quality as instructed by the Lord and therefore survives the Lord's testing then we will be rewarded accordingly. However those whose building turns out to be of inferior quality, whose building does not pass God's building regulation test then that person will suffer loss in some way.

Again we are not told what it means to suffer loss but it is clear that they will not receive the rewards that those who build with the right materials receive. We must be very clear however the

loss does not mean loss of salvation because salvation does not depend upon us or our building work but upon the Lord Jesus who is our foundation. Even if our building does not pass God's test the foundation of our lives, which is Jesus Christ and the salvation he grants remains steadfast.

Paul makes that clear here by saying that such people lose their rewards but they do not lose their salvation for they will be saved like 'one escaping through the flames.' The picture is of our wooden or hay or straw houses being on fire and although the house does not stand up to the test of fire we escape from the burning building unhurt.

So on that day of Judgement our shallow Christian lives and our shallow churches will be exposed for what they are. Our building will be shown up for what it is, it is not of good quality but we can praise God that our salvation is unaffected because Christ is our foundation.

Therefore the application is clear. Our motivation should be one of desiring that our building work will stand God's test. For that to happen we must use God's materials and use them with right motives. For it is easy to believe all the right things and even live the right way and yet have a heart that is not right because our motives are wrong. It is possible to think that we are using the right material and yet find that our building does not stand up because the right material was used with wrong motives and attitudes.

Ultimately God is the final judge of our lives and of our church but we ought to humbly ask God to reveal the nature of our building work to us. Then we need his grace to change what we need to change so that when his test of fire comes our quality of building will clearly survive and thus we will be rewarded accordingly.

However remember even if our building work turns out to be with the wrong materials, materials that do not survive God's test, let's remember that we will still be saved for our salvation does not depend on our building work but upon our foundation who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen