

Outline

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:11-22 (English Standard Version):

11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 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. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. 18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," 20 and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." 21 So 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 the present or the future—all are yours....

Introduction

When I was 11, my father started a church in Walker County. The congregation decided to build a building not far from our home.

The congregation was poor, with few members and fewer financial resources. Purchasing the land for the building took almost all of the available funds. To save money, the members donated their time to work on the building themselves, from laying concrete blocks for the walls with to wiring the building. All of us worked: the children mixed the cement and carried blocks; the men laid the blocks on the slab; and the women provided refreshments.

The congregation relied on professionals for only one part of the building: the foundation. My father and the other men of the church realized none of them had the expertise to lay a foundation or pour the concrete slab on which the building would stand.

After the foundation and slab were complete, the congregation started building. We soon realized we were never going to make a living building churches. Try as we might, we children could never consistently mix the concrete correctly; try as they might, the men could never quite lay every concrete block exactly straight. (The women had much more experience in the refreshments category than we possessed in the building category, so at least we ate well.)

The building is still there; the church now has another name, but the congregation worships in a building built by amateurs on a professional foundation. Regardless of what has been done to the building since its construction, the facility still stands, resting on a firm foundation — laid by professionals.

Paul, too, laid a “professional” foundation in Corinth. The foundation at Corinth was never in doubt, but the Corinthians’ choice of what to build was in serious question when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians faced a choice: to build patiently and deliberately with eternal materials on the foundation laid by Paul, or succumb to the temporal temptations of their culture and build a shoddy structure that would fail the test of eternal judgment.

Jesus Christ serves as the eternal foundation of our temple (v. 11). Paul used the word “θεμελιον” to convey the meaning of the Corinthians’ foundation. In a previous verse (verse 10), Paul used the word to refer to the elementary teachings of the Gospel.

In Luke 6, Jesus refers to His teachings to the foundation of our faith, saying, “Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built.”

In the same passage, Christ warns those who do not follow His teachings, comparing them to a “a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

In verse 11, Paul also warned the Corinthians about false foundations. The Church will survive only on the foundation of Jesus Christ. As the letter progresses, Paul will refer to the elementary teachings he imparted to the Corinthians. He will remind them anew of his teachings on morality, Communion, spiritual gifts, love, and the resurrection to come. According to Paul, if the Corinthians wanted to build a successful church, they must build on the foundation he established in his time there. There would be no shortcuts to a successful church.

The Church today must heed Paul’s warning. The doctrines of Scripture cannot be abandoned for the false teachings of secular society. The hymn says it best: “On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”¹

God will test the building materials we use to build our temple on His foundation (vv. 12-15). Last fall, my daughter and I watched a PBS special on the Clark Bridge in Alton, Illinois. This bridge over the Mississippi River spans 4,260 feet and required 8,100 tons of structural steel, 44,100 cubic yards of concrete and more than 160 miles of cable wrapped with four acres of yellow plastic piping.²

While pouring the concrete, the crew faced a major challenge: the concrete was already mixed when it arrived, so it had to be tested prior to pouring. After testing, the concrete — two

1. Edward Mote, “The Solid Rock,” *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 406.

2. Clark Bridge: Alton, Illinois (available online: <http://www.altonweb.com/history/clarkbridge/index2.html>).

thousand tons of it — was poured through a long pipe to the crew in the cofferdam below. The pour could not be stopped once it began. It had to be continuous, to ensure that the concrete set properly.³

As work progressed, the construction crew encountered a problem: some of the concrete failed the testing even as the load was being poured. The crew had to remove over 600 hundred cubic feet of bad concrete. The workers removed the concrete bit by bit down to the last known elevation of good concrete. The entire job had to wait until the process was complete. The narrator of the show commented, “No one likes to hang around because of a supplier's mistake, especially when you're losing money. With the bad concrete, there's a greater temptation to make up for lost time by speeding up the work and taking more risks.”⁴

In verse 13, Paul warns the Corinthians that the materials they use to build on the foundation he laid will be judged on the Day of Judgment: “each one's work will become manifest.” The word he uses, *genhsetai*, conveys the idea that the materials the Corinthians choose will be made known through testing. Everything about their choices will be revealed; nothing will remain hidden.

In the Day of Judgment (verse 13), we Christians — the builders of the Church — will show ourselves for who we truly are. The materials we choose will lay bare the motives and desires of our hearts. Those who use precious materials — costly materials purchased with sacrifice, humility, and obedience that equate to the “gold, silver, precious stones” of verse 12 — will receive a reward (verse 14). Unfortunately, the temptation always exists to use lesser materials; “wood, hay, [and] straw (verse 12)” are far more abundant and come far cheaply and quickly. Those who use these materials “will suffer loss (verse 15)” but will themselves “be saved.”

As we build on the foundation laid by Christ, we would do well to remember the lesson of the Clark Bridge workers: using the right materials the first time saves major trouble later on. We must remember that it's easier to build the structure right the first time than to face correcting the structure later. Again, there are no shortcuts in building the church. Every test counts. Every person counts. We must invest in every person to insure the strength of the entire structure. Every believer bears the responsibility of using and demonstrating the proper materials in his life. We must avoid the temptation to simply pass by the weak points and continue working. The weak points will always reveal themselves at the worst possible time.

We must remember what we are building on God's foundation (vv 16-17). Paul uses the word *ναος* (temple) in verses 16 and 17 to refer to the Corinthians as a church. The verb “*εστε*” in the sentence is the second person plural of *ειμι*, “to be.” Paul refers to the Corinthian Christians, as a

3. “SuperBridge” Nova Special (available online: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2416bridge.html>).

4. Ibid.

collective, as the “temple of God.”

Notice the plural forms: both the subject (“you”) and the verb (“are”) refer to a “we,” not to a “me.” This distinction would not have been lost on the Corinthians as it often is in our individualistic culture. We are so acculturated to thinking of the individual we fail to consider the possibility of a collective faith. It is so much easier to think only of me and my spiritual growth! Yet, I am brutally reminded by Paul’s choice of words that I cannot live the salvation lifestyle in an individualistic manner. My spiritual health relies on your spiritual health, just as your spiritual health relies heavily on mine. In this aspect, true Christianity actively subverts secular American culture. John Donne once wrote, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”⁵

Notice also that since we are God’s temple, God’s Spirit dwells in us (verse 16). In a mystical way, the Church is endowed with the very presence of Almighty God wherever believers may be found. Jesus promised His disciples — both then and now — that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Matthew 18:20).” I have often heard people complain that because a service lacked the proper emotional pitch, “the Spirit wasn’t there today.” If the Spirit wasn’t there, either Jesus lied, or there weren’t at least two believers present (making me wonder about those complaining about the service!).

We must also remember that God promises to defend His temple in verse 17. In light of the collective facet of our faith, we cannot afford to forget that God will hold each of us accountable for the condition of His temple; each of us, therefore, is accountable to God for one another. Paul’s words are as sobering now as they were to the Corinthians: “if anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.” The verb form of “destroy (φθερει)” implies God’s constant defense of His temple. Those who put God’s temple to shame or otherwise attack the temple risk the judgment of Almighty God.

On the other hand, Christians should find comfort in these words. After all, every spiritual responsibility exists to bring eternal joy in the end. Yes, maintaining and building the temple entails enormous accountability to God; however, we also find God’s protection of His people as we maintain and build His temple. God promises protection of His saints as we carefully construct His temple.

We must use God’s wisdom in choosing our building materials (vv. 18-22). Lest the Corinthians believe they can choose their “materials” on their own, Paul suddenly shifts gears. How do verses 18 through 22 connect with the previous verses?

5. John Donne, Meditation XVII, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Third Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 620.

The Corinthians had already proved themselves incapable of living the salvation lifestyle in unity with each other and with God. Old habits crept in to divide where new habits had once served to unite. Old attitudes toward secular teachings and lifestyles had replaced the elementary teachings to which Paul referred in verse 11.

In these verses, Paul returned to a theme he had introduced in the previous chapter: the wisdom of God supersedes the wisdom of humanity. Undoubtedly, there were very intelligent people in the Corinthian body. These people most likely had been schooled in the prevailing philosophies of the day. For these people, Paul's words hammered away at their supposed superiority: "the wisdom of this world is folly with God." Suddenly, these people faced a loss of status and, in some measure, of their identity. Students of the philosophers, much as students today, could identify themselves as pupils of their master. Now, Paul is stripping away any pretense of worth from their credentials. Regardless of their pedagogical pedigrees, they could not rely on their own wisdom to build the temple of God.

How were these Corinthians — and status-conscious Americans today — to cope? How are we to relate to our folly before God?

God never takes anything from us without replacing it with something infinitely better. Secular status symbols are but pale imitations of the blessings God has prepared for His people, His children. Verse 21 drives home this point by reminding the Corinthians — and us — that "all things are yours." This does not mean God gives us everything we want. On the contrary, God, through the presence of His Spirit (remember verse 16?), begins working within us to replace worldly wisdom with His wisdom, leading us to a point where we can correctly discern the worth of worldly wisdom and possessions. As this process continues in our lives, we realize how little we need the world's temporal commendations and how desperately we desire God's eternal accommodations in our lives. In other words, as we begin to turn away from wood, hay and straw to build with more precious materials, God works within us to help us desire gold, silver, and precious stones even more.

In the nineteenth century, the English Romantic poet Percy Shelley wrote a poem describing the fleeting nature of worldly splendor and wisdom. The poem, *Ozymandias*, reads in part,

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that is sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.⁶

Shelley summarizes well the inability of humanity’s achievements to measure up to what God will provide for His children. The best the world can offer pales in comparison to God’s worst. What can the world offer us to tempt us from God, when the God who loves us uses the world’s most precious metal as pavement in heaven? What can anyone in the world build that compares to the place God has prepared for us?

Conclusion

The home builder who built my home in Northport has an important habit: He is always present when his crew pours the foundation of a new house. On one occasion, a crew poured a foundation in his absence. The builder forced the crew to dig up the foundation and re-pour it when he could be present.

God has provided the foundation of the Church through the sacrifice of Christ His Son. We must rely on the wisdom of God in building our temple according to His specifications. Those who build with eternal materials are insured of an eternal reward.

6. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” (*Norton Anthology of English Literature*), 1741.

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