

LESSONS FROM CORINTHIANS

Matthew 7:24-27; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Our study for the summer is the book of 1 Corinthians. Corinth was a place where Paul ministered for 18 months, founding a church there and seeking to disciple the converts [a difficult place to minister—an environment of proud and immoral people]. The letter before us is written to the church later when Paul is in Ephesus [1 Corinthians 16:8]. Having received reports of what was going on in the church, how they were doing and the questions they had, he writes to the congregation both warnings and words of instruction. As we study this book we want to apply the teachings that Paul shared with the Corinthians to our own lives and situation. It is interesting that in this letter when Paul refers to events in Israel's history, the spiritual forefathers of these believers', he says that what was written down about Israel serves as a message and example to them [Chapter 10:1-11]. Similarly, what is written down about the Corinthians serves as a message and example to us.

Our first lesson came from the division that had been caused in the church because the Christian leaders/pastors had been pitted against one another. One group said they were of Paul—they liked Paul—they were loyal to Paul. Others said the same about Apollos and Cephas. They formed this exclusive connection to one person and would not appreciate the other leaders or receive God's word through them. They created a rivalry between these men where no rivalry existed. As we saw last week, this was a great lesson for us as we transition pastors.

Paul's response to this division provides a great perspective on how to view pastors and leaders and relate to different ones. He said that those who ministered to the Corinthians were only servants, fellow workers. They were all different and assigned different tasks, but they had one common purpose. Using the imagery of workers in a field, he said that the workers did different tasks in the field, but it was God who made things grow. It is God who changes lives, forgives and converts. Hence, the servant was not to be exalted over Christ nor pitted against another servant. All of the servants are different, gifted differently and assigned different tasks by God. You can receive and appreciate what God does with each. You don't have to pit them against each other or denigrate one to appreciate the other.

Now, Paul continues with the same thought of the work of the pastors/leaders, but he changes from the metaphor of a worker in a field to a builder of a building. He talks about what the leaders should build on and how they should build as they do their work. This is not only applicable to those who lead the church but also to us in our own individual lives.

Let's read several of these verses.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames [1 Corinthians 3:10-15].

The foundation for all of our spiritual building is Jesus Christ. When Jesus asked His disciples, at Caesarea Philippi [at the base of Mt Hermon, enormous rock wall that rises about 100' up, out of the grotto there flow the headwaters of the Jordan River—it is here that Jesus revealed his coming death and resurrection and announced his purpose of building a church] "Who do men say that I am?" The answers were John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets [Matthew 16:13-16]. All of these servants of God were great men but insufficient foundations. Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist were not enough. No prophet is sufficient. John said he was unworthy to tie Jesus' sandals. The foundation of the church is Christ, the Son of the living God.

If the foundation is not right, it will reveal itself. The sheetrock will crack, the doors won't shut, the walls will buckle, etc. With the church, the foundation has to be right and the only foundation is Jesus Christ.

When you listen to someone who is a spiritual leader, you need to listen to what they say about Jesus and what they don't say about Jesus. Back around 1980 there was a very popular, religious, movement around a man known as Rev. Sun Moon, a Korean evangelist. The church he founded was called the Unification Church. He preached that Jesus' mission as the second Adam failed because he was killed before he could find a perfect wife, that when Messiah comes on earth as the 3rd Adam he will restore the Garden of Eden by marrying a perfect mate and that the Messiah will be born in New Israel, Korea, by 1980. He had a blend of Christianity, oriental family worship and moralism. He had 2 million followers. The church bought land in New York City and there were years when the influence of the church was felt in America. The foundation of the church was not the Jesus of Scripture.

I was in my study in Virginia in probably about 1981. One of my secretaries buzzed me and said that there was the sweetest young lady that had come into the office and they had talked and she was interested in volunteering to help in our student ministry. I told her I would talk to her. She was a delightful young lady. As we talked, I asked her to tell me what she believed about Jesus. That's when the clarity came. When she finished telling me who she thought Jesus was—and it was not the Jesus of scripture-- I asked her, "Who do you believe is your savior?" Her answer, "Reverend Sun Moon." Obviously, she did not get to work with our students.

There is only one foundation for the spiritual structure that is called the church.

Paul said that he put the right foundation down—meaning that he declared the truth of Jesus in the Gospel, many of the Corinthians trusted Him and He became the foundation of the church there and their lives. Now, each leader is to build on this same foundation, which is Christ. The focus is Jesus, not the servant. What is the measure of any leader is this, "What does he say about Jesus?" and on what foundation is he building?

Today, when I hear people talk about some churches you would think that the church is built on a pastor or a leader. All across this country and in this city, there are too many personality driven churches with the pastor the focus of the building of the church. If the personality leaves or something happens to him, the church is basically over. There is one foundation and there is one builder of the church and it is not the servant who leads the church.

When I came to Carmel over 20 years ago, the foundation and focus was Jesus not Don Bouldin. The foundation and focus today is Jesus, not Wayne Poplin. When the new pastor comes the focus will be Jesus. Neither of us knows the person at this point. But I know the committee who is searching for him. And the foundation will continue to be Jesus. We move right along from one leader to another. We change pastors. We do not change foundations.

Now when the new pastor comes, you are going to ask him questions. I remember that experience with you. You are going to ask about his call to the ministry. You are going to ask about his leadership style. You are going to ask him how long he generally preaches. You are going to ask him if he likes Christian schools, women's ministry, Awana, etc. You are going to ask him about music. Some will ask about the kind of service. Let me tell you the most important question to ask—"On what foundation do you intend to build?" Give him a chance to tell you with conviction and excitement that he will build on Jesus—for there is no other foundation.

Now when we come to verse 12, we realize that every church [leader in the church] and every person who has this foundation is building something on the foundation. It may be something that will last or something that will not, but building is happening. It may be something substantial or something shoddy, but building is taking place. Therefore, Paul reminds us that we should be careful how we build. Said another way, we better be careful how we live. The materials being used for the building vary. Some are using gold, silver and costly stones [marble, granite] and some are using wood, hay and straw.

What does Paul mean by these different building materials? In some of the commentaries on 1 Corinthians authors get very detailed on the differences between these items.

The issue is not salvation. All of these are building on the only foundation. Even those whose quality of work does not stand the judgment of God are still saved.

If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames [1 Corinthians 3:15].

The issue here is building by and following God's wisdom or building by and following the world's wisdom. Which one a person is following will eventually become manifest.

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, He spoke of the wise and foolish builders.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" [Matthew 7:24-27].

One built on the rock—the sure foundation. The other built on the sand. It was much easier to build on the sand because it was already flat. But when the storm came, the sand eroded beneath the house built on the sand. Both houses looked great. They may have even been very similar. Both may have stood for years. But when the storm came, when reckoning came, when test came—one stood and the other collapsed. You don't even notice the difference until the storm comes. Jesus said that the structures represented those who heard His words and did them and those who heard His words and did not do them. It is the difference between following the wisdom of God or following our own wisdom and the wisdom of the world. If we are believers and alive, we are building something.

Many of you have been members here for years. You come almost every Sunday. You know the Lord as your personal Savior. Many of you were born here. You accepted Jesus as your Savior here. Your foundation is Jesus Christ. Others of you have come more recently. Your foundation is Jesus Christ. But Paul is not talking about the foundation at this point. He is talking about what we are building on that foundation. Every day of our lives we make a conscious decision, a conscious choice on how we will build—when we get up, when we go to work, when we go to college, go on a date—will we build according to the wisdom of God or will we use other material? Regardless of what building material you are using, the structure may look good for a while, but eventually the building material will be revealed. That is true for a church and for a life.

What does it mean to build with gold, silver and precious stones? It means to build according to the words of Jesus, the wisdom of God and build with what matches the foundation. How does that play out practically?

1. Are you building with sacrifice, humility, faith, selflessness?
2. Is the church being built on the foundation with biblical truth, integrity, humility, with the intent of glorifying God, from a base of prayer, faith in God, etc.?
3. Do we live for Jesus or for ourselves?
4. Do we live to glorify Him or to gratify ourselves?
5. Do we live in fear or walk by faith?
6. Did we do what we did for the glory of God or for the applause of men?
7. It came off okay but we did it in our strength rather than His.
8. It is measured in terms of numbers instead of substance.
9. My life is based on prayer and doing the will of God.
10. I am laying up treasure in heaven rather than on earth. I am investing in what matters eternally.
11. Are you teaching your children to build on Christ and follow Him regardless of the cost? Or is your instruction to get a good education so you get a good job and make a lot of money?
12. Does your morality match the precious foundation on which you are founded?

How many times do we begin to see cracks in the walls? Right now Creflo Dollar is in the news, accused of assaulting his 15 year old daughter. This is a 30,000 member church. The structure looks good and successful. Are the charges true or false, we don't know for sure yet. But the teaching being used to build the church is on the prosperity gospel. The house will not stand the test.

What would happen if our words were tested, our schedules tested, our philosophy of life tested, our giving tested? Would it be gold or straw? Exposure will come.

Paul says that God will test it on the Day. That is true. But the exposure can come before the Day. It is happening all the time.

It may sound like Jesus and Paul are trying to scare us. If a tornado were coming and you were asleep and I knocked down your door, awakened you and got you to an inside room in the house, you would not accuse me of scaring you. You don't accuse the rescuer of scaring you. You thank them for the warning.

Take heed how we build. We are building all the time—with some kind of material. Build according to the wisdom of God. That structure will stand the storm and the testing of God.

Others need to first place their lives on the foundation of Christ.