

*1 Corinthians 3:11-15***PREFACE**

In the paragraph beginning with v10 and ending with v15 the apostle Paul is building something: a church. He begins by laying the foundation, and that sure foundation is nothing less than Jesus Christ.

Whether he realized it or not, the prophet Isaiah began this construction by setting in place the cornerstone of the foundation.

Read Isaiah 28:16.

Jesus referred to this prophecy on a number of occasions, but it was the apostle Peter who explicitly identified Jesus as the prophesied cornerstone when he was put on trial after healing a lame beggar.

When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:7-12)

Now Paul extends the metaphor with Christ Jesus becoming the entire foundation on which a/the church—specifically here, the Corinthian church—is to be built. In v10 Paul relates that, while there in person, he set in place this foundation by bringing the authentic gospel of Christ to Corinth. But then he had to leave Corinth, so others would have to continue the construction on their own. And based on reports he has received, the construction job for this new church is not going so well. The foundation may be strong, but the superstructure is dangerously shaky—and the apostle fears its collapse.

He warns them at the end of v10 that “each man must be careful how he builds on” the foundation of Christ.

v11

Verse 11 seems out of place: the end of v10 speaks of building *on* the foundation, and is continued in v12ff.

The message of vv10-11 seems to track better if we reorder the text—without changing a word—by inserting v11 as a parenthetical clarification *within* v10. It also flows better into our passage for today.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation (for no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ) and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. Now if any man builds on the foundation... (1 Corinthians 3:10-12a reordered)

Wherever it is situated, the message of v11 is important: The church, *every* church, *must* have Jesus Christ as its foundation.

The proper, solid foundation has been laid. It is now time to select the building materials to raise the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15.

Note: Let's be clear about the imagery. In this paragraph, vv10-15, Paul is specifically applying his analogy to the church—not the building, but the community of believers in Corinth who comprise the church. Thus we can easily apply the counsel in this analogy to *any* local church. But it does no violence to the passage to extend it as well to the life of each individual believer. Not just the church, but the life of every believer must have as its foundation Jesus Christ and His gospel. And just as we select proper building materials for constructing and maintaining the church, we are also to select proper materials for building up our own life in Christ. That is, the analogy is not limited to what we do for the church, but can be applied to what we as individuals do to construct and strengthen our relationship with our Lord.

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

We should not get sidetracked by trying to allegorize the materials Paul lists; his point is more simple than that: some things last and some do not; some things are imperishable (and thus more compatible with the imperishable foundation), some are perishable. His emphasis is on the people and the work they turn in for the Lord—not on the subtle differences between gold and silver, and how each represents some facet of Christian life. That's not what he is talking about.

John MacArthur: As long as believers are alive, they *are* building. They are building some sort of life, some sort of church, some sort of Christian fellowship and service. It may be a beautiful structure or a hovel, it may be by intention or neglect, but it cannot help being something... Every Christian is a builder, and every Christian builds with some sort of materials. God wants us to build only with the best materials, because only the best materials are worthy of Him, are the most effective, and will last.

The items listed by Paul are not examples of materials placed into two categories of righteous and sinful. If you were living in the first century your church would almost certainly meet in a private home built out of mud brick (which would contain straw) and small amounts of wood, all covered over with either mud or thin plaster. There wouldn't be a trace of "gold, silver," or "precious stones" in sight. There is nothing inherently "bad" in "wood, hay, straw."

The point he is making, as we will see in the next verse, is that some materials will survive fire, and some will not. There may not be anything sinful about that church built from mud and straw—but it will not pass through the fire without being burned up. At this point in the text that is all the materials represent: the ability of each to survive fire. The first three will; the last three will not.

Verses 13 to 15 are the meat of this passage.

v13

each man's work will become evident;

NIV: his work will be shown for what it is,

Right off we are reminded that Paul has been speaking all along about (in the NASB) "each man's *work*," not about what tools or building materials he chooses to use.

v10: **each man** must be careful how he builds on it.

v12: if **any man** builds...

v13: **each man's** work... the quality of **each man's** work.

v14: If **any man's** work...remains...

v15: If **any man's** work is burned up...

When will this happen?

for the day will show it

Even without capitalizing the word "day," as do some translations, we know from the definite article—"the day"—that Paul refers to the *parousia*—the Day of the Lord, when Christ returns to gather His people home and judge them for their reward.

Sidebar: As we learned in our study of the Thessalonian letters, *parousia* is the standard word for the return of Christ during the end times, and refers to His descent from the clouds—but can also refer to the *extended visitation*. The *parousia* of Christ can include His descent, His gathering of the elect, the return to heaven "with all His saints," and the moment each of us stands before Christ and the Father for our lives to be evaluated.

because it is to be revealed with fire,

In contrast to the normal pace for your humble teacher we have been moving so far at a breakneck pace through these verses, but it is now time to slow down and camp out for a while.

The Greek here is ambiguous about a subject for the verb translated "revealed." Some (primarily older) commentators say the subject should be "work," as in "each man's work will be revealed with fire." Some (primarily more recent) commentators say the subject should be "the day," as in "the day will manifest itself with fire." Both *can* be true and, frankly, I can see it either way.

The principal argument for making the subject "the day" is that if the subject is "work," this makes the end of the verse redundant—but I disagree with that argument (more on this in a moment). Gordon Fee, who, along with David Garland, favors "the day" as the subject, would paraphrase this verse, "For the Day of Judgment will expose every person's workmanship, whether gospel or *sophia*, because that Day, when it comes, manifests itself with fire; and the fire will test the quality of each person's work."

This interpretation typically references Paul's description of Christ's return from 2 Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8.

The problem with this is that for the pretribulation premillennialist—which I am, along with most in this class and church—vv7-8 in 2 Thessalonians refer to Christ's return in wrath and judgment, to deal with unbelievers and to establish His kingdom on earth after the Tribulation—not to either the Rapture of the church or to the judgment of Christians.

This evaluation Paul speaks of will presumably take place at the final judgment, before the "great white throne" (Revelation 20:11-12), the "judgment seat of Christ."

Read 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

[Back to our text.](#)

and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

I also do not see the redundancy mentioned by Garland and Fee. In the first clause Paul uses the verb "revealed."

revealed = *apokalypto* = from <G575> (apo) and <G2572> (kalupto); **to take off the cover, i.e. disclose** :- reveal. ([The last book of the Bible is entitled *apokalypsis*.](#))

The idea here is, *Let's take the lid off so we all can take a look at what's inside.* Whereas in the second clause he uses the verb "test."

test = *dokimazo* = from <G1384> (dokimos); **to test** (literal or figurative); by implication to approve :- allow, discern, **examine**, × like, (ap-) **prove**, **try**, **analyze**.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. ("examine" = *dokimazo*)

That is, *Now that we have revealed what is inside, let's examine it to see if it is worth keeping.* These seem to be two rather different actions, so I do not see the redundancy factor.

By my reading, all of our popular translations seem to favor the "work" as subject, rather than "the day." And that seems to make the most sense to me.

In our next session we will return to this verse and finish out the paragraph.