

## The Church of God

### 1 Corinthians 3:5-17

Introduction: There are two words in the English language that will make almost any student cringe, their blood pressure go up, and sweat break out on their brow. The words: final exam. Now, it is important to note that every Christian is going to face a final exam before God. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be repaid (*ESV*, “receive what is due”) for what he has done in the body, whether good or bad.” It is interesting to realize this is an exam you cannot really study for. You see, you are actually taking it right now. You have been taking it since the day you were saved and born again. This is an examination not of your salvation, but of your service. Every believer in Jesus Christ will give an account for their service as a Christian, and those who do the work of ministry will especially be examined on that day. James 3:1 teaches us, “Not many should be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment.”

Paul will use three pictures to describe the Church of God in verses 5-17: 1) a field (vv. 5-9), 2) a building (vv. 9-15) and 3) a temple (vv. 16-17). His goal is to put ministers and the ministry in proper perspective for the divisive, quarreling Corinthians. In the work of the Lord there are no superstars, only servants who point us to Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2). He is the only way of salvation.

He is the church's foundation (3:11). Glorify God by making much of His Son, the Savior, not the Lord's servants.

I. The Church is God's Field 3:5-9

The church at Corinth was in trouble. Politics had been allowed to infiltrate the church and the result was they were acting more like rival political parties than brothers and sisters in Christ. Members were exalting Paul and Apollos and Cephas (3:22) and putting them on pedestals that were completely inappropriate. Paul, therefore, wants to set the record straight and make things clear. Christian ministers are simply servants whom God sovereignly assigns. They do what they do because God called them to their task. It is that simple. Further, they are ultimately responsible to him, as we all are, and He will hold them accountable for their work. Paul puts it perfectly in 4:1, "A person should think of us this way: as servants of Christ."

1) We are servants who work together 3:5-6, 8-9

Paul begins verse 5 with two rhetorical questions: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" The answer: "They are servants (*diakonoi*) through whom you believed. They are instruments used by God "through whom you believed, and each has the role (*NLT*, "work") the Lord has given them." They are simply doing what God has called them to do. In verse 6 Paul focuses on how God used his servants in the church at Corinth. Paul

“planted, Apollos watered...” Verses 8-9 reinforce this image but draw attention to the fact we are on the same team striving for the same goal in ministry. “Now he who plants and he who waters are one,” working to the same end or purpose. “We are God’s coworkers (*ESV*, “fellow workers”)” working in “God’s field” (v. 9). Here “God’s field” is a reference to the local church at Corinth. And, God takes notice of his servants, his “fellow workers” (*ESV*). “Each will receive his own reward (*ESV*, “wages”) according to his labor” (v. 8). Schreiner says, “God will evaluate quality of work and apportion rewards accordingly” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 89). God makes the assignments and, as we are about to see, “gives the growth” (v. 7). However, how we serve matters. What we do and why we do it matters. Our service to Christ is important and meaningful, even to the “intentions of the hearts” (4:5). God’s servants are teammates, working with one another not in competition with one another. I like the way Vaughn and Lea put it, “Paul notes the essential unity between planter and waterer (v. 8). They are one in the aim, result and motivating power of their work. They are allies not rivals” (*1 Cor.* BSC, 41).

## 2) God is the Lord who gives the growth

3:6-7

In planting, cultivating and growing God’s field, the Lord’s servants do their part of planting and watering. However, they cannot make things grow

spiritually anymore than a farmer can make things grow physically. God and God alone “gave the growth” (v. 6). The words of Jesus in John 4:34-38 and Matthew 9:38 can be heard ringing in the background. God is the “Lord of the harvest!” In verse 7 Paul again wants us to get the proper perspective in God’s economy. The words are humbling but necessary when the “cult of personality” has wormed its way into the church. “So, then, neither the one who plants [Paul] nor the one who waters [Apollos] is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” Carson puts it like this: “To heap unqualified and exclusive praise on the sower is to focus too narrowly; to praise those who handle the irrigation and forget those who sow the seed is to be myopic. In any case it is God alone who makes things grow. Should not he be praised?” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 76). Exalting men to a divine status verges on idolatry and robs God of the glory that rightly belongs only to Him. Thank him for the service of his servants. Praise him for the growth in his field that only He can give. Again, “He is the Lord of the harvest.” In comparison to God, Paul would say, Apollos and I amount to nothing!

## II. The Church is God’s Building

3:9-15

Paul shifts from an agriculture image to an architectural image in verses 9-15.

The Church of the Lord Jesus is his field in which He sends His servants and

coworkers to plant, water, cultivate and reap a harvest. It is also His “building” (v. 9) where He sends His “skilled master builder” (v. 10) and other laborers and workers to build with materials of excellence that will withstand the purifying fires of revelation on “the day” of judgment, what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “the judgment seat of Christ.”

1) The foundation is Christ

3:9-11

Salvation is by grace, and so is our service in ministry. Paul says it was, “According to God’s grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder” (Gr. *architekton*), a foundation upon which “another builds.” Many work together, as a team, to build a local church that will flourish for the glory of God and the good of all nations. And, because it is the church of the Lord Jesus, “each one is to be careful how he builds on it.” We are to serve Christ and build up His church with excellence and integrity. We work with good motives, methods and goals. How we work in and for the church matters. Why we work in and for the church matters. The reason is made crystal clear in verse 11 as Paul draws attention to the foundation of the building: “For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ” (v. 11). The foundation for any church and every church is Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2). It is the gospel. No other foundation is

acceptable before God. Any other foundation and you will not have a true church! Warren Wiersbe is helpful here: “The foundation is laid by the proclaiming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The foundation is the most important part of the building, because it determines the size, shape, and strength of the superstructure. A ministry may seem to be successful for a time, but if it is not founded on Christ, it will eventually collapse and disappear” (*Be Wise*, 53). What a critically important word for our day when many so called churches are building on personalities, programs, politics, and social agendas. What is your church known for? What is it standing on? Christ and him crucified is the only thing that will last!

2) Our construction must be careful

3:12-13

The foundation has been laid. It is Jesus Christ. Now, workers build on this rock solid, unbreakable, and eternal foundation. But, there is a question. How will we build? Paul uses an illustration to show that how we build is important, especially the materials we use. There are materials that are permanent and valuable that will survive the test of fire in verse 13. Paul describes these good materials as “gold, silver, and costly stones.” On the other hand it is possible to do ministry and service in the church with materials that don’t last, are cheap, and of little value. Paul calls these “wood, hay, or straw.” Now, we with our limited and finite perspective may

not be able to tell the difference. Oh, but God can. Paul tells us, “each ones work will become obvious” (v. 13). There is coming a day, a day of judgment and reckoning for the believer, when the quality of your service for Christ will be revealed, disclosed, made obvious. Verses 13-15 tell us exactly how this will happen.

3) God’s evaluation will be correct      3:13-15 (cf. Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10)

Revelation 19:12 teaches us that the exalted Lord Jesus has eyes “like a fiery flame.” This speaks of his omniscience and penetrating judgment into the innermost depths of the human soul. I believe it will be those eyes that will judge the works of believers done in service to our Lord on what Paul calls in verse 13, “the Day.” The day is the Day of the Lord when Christ returns. On that Day the works of the believer will be “disclosed” (*ESV*, “manifest”) because “it will be revealed by fire.” Indeed, “The fire will test the quality of each ones’ work. If anyone’s work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will experience (*ESV*, “suffer”) loss, but he himself will be saved – but only as through fire” (vv. 13-15). Now, it is critically important for us to understand several theological truths in relation to this text and others like it.

1) This is a judgment of service not salvation.

- 2) This is the Judgment Seat of Christ for believers (2 Cor. 5:10) not the Great White Throne Judgment of unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15).
- 3) This judgment will be impartial and perfect.
- 4) This judgment involves the quality of our work not the quantity.
- 5) This judgment will evaluate both actions and motives (1 Cor. 4:5).
- 6) Christ will evaluate what we taught, believed and lived before others. Ministers of the Word and leaders in the church will be held to a higher standard of responsibility and judgment.
- 7) Just as there are degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 11:20-24), there will be degrees of reward in heaven. However, no believer will be jealous, envious, or unfulfilled. The Puritan Thomas Watson said it well, “And let me tell you, the more labour you have put forth for the kingdom of heaven, the more degrees of glory you shall have. As there are degrees of torment in hell, so of glory in heaven (Matthew 23:14). As one star differeth from another in glory, so shall one saint (1 Corinthians 15:41. Though every vessel of mercy shall be full, yet one may hold more than another” (*A Puritan Golden Treasury*, Banner of Truth, 2000, p. 260).



Paul now introduces a third metaphor or image to describe the Lord's Church, though it is possible to see it as an extension of the "building" metaphor of verses 9-15. The image is that of "God's temple." The phrase is used three times in verses 16-17, with the word temple appearing a total of four times.

Later Paul will talk about the believer's body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (6:19), but here he is clearly talking about the church, the "body of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; 5:23). Paul will make four observations that naturally flow from this picture of the Lord's Church.

1) We are His sanctuary 3:16

Paul raises a rhetorical question which is something of a rebuke: "Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple?" The word "not" is fronted for emphasize. The word "temple" is the Greek word *naos* which referred to the inner sanctuary of the temple. This would have powerfully impacted the readers of this letter. You are God's special, holy creation. You are now God's temple, His holy place. What an incredible statement of their identity in Christ and their status before God. But, there is more.

2) We have His Spirit 3:16

As God's temple, "the Spirit of God lives in you." Vaughn says, "in believers the very presence of God exists" (p. 44). Schreiner adds, "Just as Yahweh resided in the temple under the old covenant and in Israel (Exod.

25:8; 29:45; Lev. 26:11-12; Ps. 114:2), so now *God's Spirit* dwells in the new temple, the church of Jesus Christ" (p. 93). Paul will emphasize the church as God's temple again in 2 Cor. 6:16 and Eph. 2:19-22. A Jewish believer, as well as a Gentile believer, would be stunned by this declaration. The sovereign God of the universe now dwells in a small, insignificant people called the church. It is the very temple of God.

### 3) We are special

3:17

God loves and cares deeply for His church, that which was purchased by the precious blood of His dear Son (Acts 20:28). Therefore those who minister as his servants and workers should take great care how they treat it. Paul sounds the strongest possible warning, "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him" (v. 17). These words take our breath away and call for the most careful reflection. If "anyone" is inclusive and comprehensive. No one is excluded. "Destroys the church." Carson notes, "The ways of destroying the church are many and colorful. Raw factionalism will do it. Rank heresy will do it. Taking your eyes off the cross and letting other, more peripheral matters dominate the agenda will do it – admittedly more slowly than frank heresy, but just as effectively on the long haul" (p. 83). Entertainment, false conversions, a watered down gospel, fancy programs, impressive buildings, weak preaching, gossip, materialism, lack of prayer,

loss of missions and evangelistic passion, and much more will drain the church of its life. Destroy God's temple, "God will destroy him." We have been told those who build the Lord's church well will be properly rewarded. Now we are told that those who destroy his Church, His temple, will themselves be destroyed. The warning of Galatians 1:8-9 immediately comes to mind, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." Paul does not specify the destruction though we wish he would. Perhaps Vaughn puts it best, "it refers to something grave. It represents some terrible ruin and eternal loss" (p. 44).

#### 4) We are sacred

3:17

Paul concludes this section with a straightforward and obvious truth in light of what he has written, "for God's temple is holy, and that is what you are." The idea of "holy" is one of separation. By means of faith in the crucified Christ, the church is now separated from the world unto Him for purity of life and devotion. The last phrase simply drives home the fact of this truth. We are now His. We are those chosen by God. Amazingly, God chooses to live in and among his people the church! What a blessing. What a privilege.

What a responsibility. We must serve her well. There is a final exam we all must take.

Conclusion: Salvation is by grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone. It is a free gift we cannot earn. It is not a reward for the things we do. Jesus lived the life we should have lived but didn't. He died the death we should have died but now don't have to. Now He offers us the free gift of eternal life we do not deserve but can freely receive by faith alone. All of this makes many Christians hesitant to talk about rewards; even spiritually squeamish. However, that should not be the case when rewards are properly understood. Jesus taught us that God will reward his servants and coworkers for the good works of service they have performed as Christians (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18). Indeed he admonishes us to "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20). So, as we anticipate standing before the "Judgment Seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10), what kind of works will we discover our Savior will reward? In his supreme book on heaven entitled *The Glory Now Revealed*, my friend Andy Davis lists ten. While his list is not intended to be exhaustive, it helps us to see in Scripture the kinds of good works we should be pursuing everyday of our Christian life out of gratitude for our salvation and a desire to glorify our Savior in all we do (1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 2:10). These gospel inspired pursuits provide a fitting conclusion to our study.

### What God Will Reward

- 1) Anything done for the glory of God (even simple daily tasks; 1 Cor. 10:31).
- 2) Humble servanthood (Mt. 20:26-28).
- 3) Sacrificial giving (2 Sam. 24:24; Luke 21:3; 2 Cor. 9:6-7).
- 4) Suffering for the kingdom (Mt. 5:11-12).
- 5) Advancing the gospel (1 Thess. 2:19).
- 6) Giving to the poor (Luke 14:12-14).
- 7) Secret acts of piety – fasting and prayer (Mt. 6:6, 18).
- 8) Anything done to help those advancing the gospel (Mt. 10:42).
- 9) Anything done to help other Christians in any way (Hebrews 6:10).
- 10) An honorable life of hard work (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).