

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

Trust the Blueprints

(1 Corinthians 3:9-23)

Study #4

Introduction: Touring a home to NOT live in...

I have a good friend who has partnered with our church in cross-cultural ministry for a long time. He and his family were very involved here at Northwest before leaving San Antonio to serve Jesus.¹

During a part of their time here, they lived in a neighborhood not far from here during San Antonio's 1980's "boomtown" era.

During this building boom, some builders were building homes carelessly. It turned out that my friends' house fell into that category.

My friend was - and is - a very good handyman. He laughed as he took me on a tour of his (rented) home to show me the house's construction flaws.

Among other things, he pointed out that every non-load-bearing interior wall in the house had either separated from the floor or from the ceiling.

Now, I figure that when the house was brand new, it looked great.

But when I walked through the house a short five years after it was built, it was clear that the builder had not followed the architect's blueprints. The shoddy workmanship was obvious.

Today, the Apostle Paul tells us that we are each in the construction business and that our lives are contributing to a building project for the ages.

We are to trust and to follow the Master Architect's blueprints, because the way we build matters.

Review...

To review, Paul has been urging his readers - us! - to fight for unity in the church.

In the church at Corinth, there were factions and divisions. People in the church were siding with this leader over another leader, leading to "***jealousy and strife.***" (2:3)

Disunity ruled there.

Any church can divide over personalities, over ministries that consider their "silo" to be more important than other ministries, and over all kinds of other stuff.

Paul's resolution of this problem was to recognize the different roles different people played in the formation and development of the church. Everybody has a part to play; every ministry contributes to the overall work of Jesus.

He ended by writing that ***[1 Corinthians 3:9] we*** (the apostles) ***are God's fellow workers*** (no boasting), ***you*** (the readers) ***are God's field, God's building.***"

In what follows, he enlarges on the final metaphor: "***God's building.***"

Building On a Solid Foundation (3:10-17)

The Church's One Foundation (3:10-11)

¹ I tell this story without revealing names to protect my friend who often serves Jesus in places where it is dangerous to be an outspoken Jesus follower.

Paul laid down a good foundation (vv. 10a, 11)

[10a] According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation...[11] For no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Paul was the general contractor for the church at Corinth when he had been with them. He didn't draw up the plans. He wasn't the architect. God presented him with the blueprints, and he trusted and followed those blueprints.

Paul didn't design the church, but he did take the survey, set the stakes, framed in the footprint, and poured the slab.

The foundation was poured in the shape of an empty cross. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord - crucified and resurrected.

When Paul went to Corinth, he brought one message: Jesus loved the Corinthians so much that He died and rose again for them...and eternal life is given as a gift to anyone who believes in Jesus.

That was the message the Corinthians heard over and over again from their founding apostle. And that is the only possible foundation for a church.

The footprint of any construction project determines the kind of building it will become.

A church - a living body of Christians who come together to grow as disciples who worship, love, and serve - can only be built on the foundation of Jesus and His Gospel.

With the attention Paul had given to laying a good Gospel foundation in Corinth, there was no reason there should be a *"leaning tower of Corinth."*

But Paul wrote this letter because he had heard that the church was, in fact, tilting. And the problem had to be, not with the foundation, but with what was being built on top of the foundation.

Others were building on the foundation (v. 10b)

[10b]...and another is building upon it.

Paul knew that in his absence, other people in Corinth were teaching and discipling the Corinthians who had believed in Jesus.

For instance, we know that Apollos went to Corinth after Paul left and helped out. No doubt there were others.

In fact, every Christian who was a part of that church participated in "building" the church.

Church construction (and so that nobody thinks I'm talking about a physical building, let's say *"formation"* or *"development"*) is never a matter of one person's or one team's work.²

Everybody in a church contributes his or her gifts and talents and personality and passion to create the unique, loving ministry footprint of a church in a community.³ That's the way it was in Corinth and that's how it works, here, too.

So, Paul didn't have a problem with other people working on the church that he founded.⁴ That's the way it is supposed to be.

But he did issue a warning to these builders: ***[10c] But each person must be careful how he builds on it.***

It's possible that a framer or a plumber or an electrician might come in after a very fine foundation is laid and make a mess of things on a home construction project.

² At no point does Paul ever mention an actual brick and mortar, stick-built building. The first church building we know of dates from the 3rd century.

³ That is the thought behind Paul's words in Ephesians 4:16.

⁴ No one in the New Testament ever refers to the church as *"My church"* - except Jesus. Not a pastor or Elder or church board. Nobody (Matthew 16:18)

And it is clear that these other builders were wrecking what should have been a powerful Gospel witness in Corinth by, as Paul puts it, using inferior building materials.

Inspection Day is Coming (3:12-15)

Choosing building materials (v. 12)

[12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw...

That is an interesting list of materials, at least if we're talking about building materials.

The first materials listed have the greatest market value, but wood is a far better construction material than precious stones. So, we shouldn't press Paul's metaphor too far. He is using figurative language.

In this list, the more costly materials are valued more than the cheaper materials. Gold costs the builder something. Straw costs him nothing.

So, market value counts in Paul's listing of materials. But the most important feature of the materials listed is combustibility.

Gold, silver, and precious stones aren't consumed when they pass through a fire. Wood, hay, and straw go up in flames in seconds.

Paul warns us to not build with materials that don't last in a fire.

An inspection by fire (v. 13)

[13] each one's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire and the fire itself will test the quality of each one's work."

In the refining process, fire purges dross from metal so that what is left behind is pure, without alloy. But if you throw wood, hay, or straw into a furnace, you'll only get ashes.

The "construction" work that Paul is addressing here is obviously that of "building" (developing / forming / growing) the work of Jesus in a local church.

And his "gotcha" point is that there is a "**day**" coming when the quality of a Christian builder's faithfulness to Jesus and their service for Jesus will be revealed and tested. Will it stand up to the fire?

The picture here is of a fire sweeping through a building, burning everything that is combustible. Paul then describes what happens after the fire burns through the building.⁵

The Inspector's verdict (vv. 14-15)

Reward for the builder whose work is fireproof (v. 14)

[14] If anyone's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

Paul mentions a reward, not a gift. That's important. Eternal life is a gift, freely given to the one who believes.⁶

We *earn* a reward. God will richly reward the Christian whose works survive the fire. He worked for Jesus faithfully. She served Jesus faithfully.

Paul is not saying that we earn God's love and acceptance any more than a child earns her parents' love and acceptance by doing chores.

But...a mom or a dad might reward a child in any number of ways - money, a gift, a new responsibility, or privilege - to affirm that they like what the child is doing.⁷

⁵ The fire is not the fire of hell, but a symbolic fire of purging.

⁶ "Reward" = *μισθον* - Leon Morris (an outstanding Greek scholar) says that this word would be better rendered *wage*. In any case, it is not a gift but is earned.

Jesus knows how to reward those who faithfully serve Him.

That reward is what the Christian has to look forward to who builds a life with gold, silver, and precious stone faithfulness.

But what about the Christian whose shoddy work and inferior materials are consumed by the fire?

Loss for the builder whose work burns (v. 15)

[15] If anyone's work is burned up⁸, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet only so as through fire.⁹

Just like there will be a reward for faithfulness, there will be loss of reward for having lived unfaithfully and without service. That's a wood, hay, straw life.

And just like eternal life was not in view with the receiving of a reward, so loss of eternal life is not in view here. This person has believed in Jesus, so, **"he himself will be saved..."** - but he'll have the smell of smoke on him.¹⁰

We don't know all that **"suffer loss"** might involve.

At the least, though, it means that a Christian whose works are burned up won't receive the reward that the *"gold, silver and precious stones"* builder will receive.

The judgment seat of Christ...

What Paul is talking about here is a judgment of believers after this life ends that we call The Judgment Seat of Christ. The Greek word is *bema*.¹¹

In Corinth, there was an actual, physical *bema*. It was a large, lavishly decorated stone platform, located in the central city market.

At this *bema*, government officials handed out prizes to athletes who won events at the biennial Isthmian Games. There, too, government officials handed out punishments to law-breakers.

So, both positives and negatives were dealt with at the *bema* in Corinth.

A Christian in Corinth would have had a very vivid image in mind when he heard Paul's words read out loud about **"will receive a reward"** and **"will suffer loss."**

At issue at the *bema* is this: Did my life contribute to the living, breathing "house" of God, the working, serving, loving body of Jesus in a community?

To the extent that I did, to that extent I will receive a reward. To the extent that I didn't, to that extent I will not receive a reward.¹²

If the idea of a believer's judgment is new to you, or if it seems foreign or odd to you, I can tell you that the idea appears frequently in the New Testament.

We'll see it as a part of our study of 1 Corinthians when Paul writes that some Christians in Corinth were sick, and some had actually died because they had taken the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper in a way that dishonored Jesus.

⁷ Many believe that praise and affirmation from God is a big piece of the reward.

⁸ The historical burning of Corinth by Mummius in 146 BC may have suggested this metaphor.

⁹ There are other biblical passages that use the terminology of being saved **"yet only as through fire."** See Amos 4:11; Zechariah 3:2; Jude 23.

¹⁰ When we see a reference to fire, we should not automatically assume that the biblical writer is talking about hell. Paul is not talking about hell here, but loss of reward. As Eric Sauer wrote, *"The position of being a child of God is not forfeitable. But the inheritance / reward certainly is."* (In the Arena of Faith)

¹¹ For Paul's use of this word (*bema*), See 2 Corinthians 5:10. Also, see 1 Corinthians 9:27, 2 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6, Romans 14 for a small sampling of the references to believers' judgment in the New Testament.

¹² Note that in verse 15, Paul can imagine a Christian whose "works" are all burned up - and yet is still saved. My understanding is that most Christians will receive some reward and will suffer some loss. But the possibility exists of some Christians receiving no reward.

I mention this one example to say that since God is willing to bring believers in Jesus into judgment in this life, it shouldn't surprise us that He will do the same in the next.

The judgment will have nothing to do with eternal life, since that matter is resolved when someone believes in Jesus. But it will have everything to do with reward and a tragic loss of reward.

Paul has one more comment in this warning section. Listen as he reminds us of who we, together, are.

The Church is God's Treasure: Handle with Care (3:16-17)

The church is God's temple (3:16)

[16] Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

Keep in mind that Paul is not writing to an individual here, but to the whole church.

And here, Texan comes in handy: ***"Don't y'all know that y'all are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in y'all?"***

The body of Christ is a temple. And what is a temple but God's dwelling place?

When the members (and I don't mean "formal members," but Christians who are a part of the community of faith in a local assembly) of the church gather - for fellowship, for worship, for ministry - God is in the middle of it. We at Northwest Community Church are a temple.¹³

Not the physical structure where we meet. Not 8900 Guilbeau. Us. We, the people. That is who we are.

Paul's rhetorical question foreshadows what follows.

¹³ There are two Greek words for temple. One word, "*hieron*" refers to the temple precincts, while the other one "*naos*" (used here) denotes the sanctuary, the dwelling place of God.

Payback to the one who damages Jesus' church (v. 17)

[17] If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy that person,¹⁴ for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.¹⁵ ("...and that is what y'all are")

God won't let people mess with holy things with impunity. There are consequences.

Here's one example from the Old Testament.

King David had put the Ark of the Covenant on an oxcart to return it to Jerusalem after it had been taken away for a time.

The Ark nearly fell off that oxcart, so a man named Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark so that it wouldn't crash to the ground.

And, while that sounds like a good thing to do, God had commanded that no one was ever to touch the Ark. There were explicit instructions about how to transport the Ark - and it wasn't by oxcart.

David failed by putting the Ark on an oxcart and Uzzah failed by treating the Ark with disrespect by touching it. So, God struck Uzzah dead (2 Samuel 6).

Along the same lines, in the book of Acts, a believing couple, Ananias and Sapphira, lied to the Holy Spirit¹⁶ - God put them to death.

I think that it's worth mentioning that this word, "***destroy***," has a broad range of meaning - and all of the meanings are sobering. It is a verb that can mean "*to damage*" or "*to ruin*" something.

¹⁴ Does "***destroy***" mean loss of eternal life? No. Better to understand Paul's thought in terms of corrupting / damaging / ruining.

¹⁵ It is not clear if Paul means to say, "*And that (the temple) is what you are.*" Or "*And that (holy) is what you are.*" It may be best to leave the phrase ambiguous or to include both senses, "*And THAT - the holy temple - is what you are.*"

¹⁶ When the Bible says that they lied to the Holy Spirit, they were talking with the Apostle Peter. I wonder if God considers it "***lying to the Holy Spirit***" whenever we misrepresent the truth to fellow believers in whom the Holy Spirit dwells?

What Paul says here is such a hard saying that some Bible scholars¹⁷ insist that Paul must have been writing about someone who is outside the faith. God certainly wouldn't "**destroy**" (or *damage* or *ruin*) one of His own children, right?

I am sure that God doesn't take away a Christian's eternal life. (If He did that, then "eternal life" wasn't very eternal, was it?)

And I am sure that "**destroy**" here doesn't mean "annihilate."

But I am also sure that to *destroy* or *corrupt* or *lead astray* or *defile* or *ruin* (all perfectly appropriate translations of this Greek word, "*phtheiro*."¹⁸) the work of Jesus is to trifle with the object of God's affection.

God reserves the right to treat anyone who would damage His temple, His people, with exceptional severity.

God loves the church. He gave His Son for her. He is jealous for her and if anyone harms her, they answer to Him.

Summary: It is obvious that there is a lot of symbolism in this passage. The building, the building materials, the fire. But the symbols point to a reality. That reality is believers' judgment.

If you're concerned that judgment, reward, and loss of reward contradict grace, I am convinced they don't. Condemnation would contradict grace. Accountability doesn't.

Standing before Jesus in heaven at what we call "The Judgment Seat of Christ" to have our lives evaluated doesn't contradict grace.

And THAT is what is in view here.

So, we will "**suffer loss**" at the Judgment Seat of Christ if we have used sub-par materials in our work of developing and forming and maturing Jesus' work on earth through His body.

That being the case, let's stop using wood, hay, and straw to build.

And we're using wood, hay, and straw every time we hurt the unity of the church through party spirit (1:10-31), by clinging to babyish, self-centered ways (2:1--3:9), or by falling into "**jealousy and strife**" (3:3).

But if "**receiving a reward**" at the Judgment Seat of Christ is what we have to look forward to by using the "**gold, silver, and precious stones**" of love measured by time, energy, sacrifice, finances, and service, then let's build with these valuable commodities.

Each one of us here is building.

One Day, your contribution to the work of Jesus will be evaluated as if by fire, as will mine.

If we build well, we will receive a reward because we will have been loving the object of God's affection, the living, breathing body of Christ.

In the remainder of what we're going to see from the Bible this morning - all of which is still dealing with judgment - Paul passes out some free (but priceless) advice about how to view the universe and how to live out our proper role in it.

It is possible that any of us might fail to understand our place in the grand scheme of things, so the warning Paul issues is appropriate.

Ownership (vv. 18-23)

"Wisdom" That Isn't Wise (3:18-19a)

[18a] Take care that no one deceives himself.

¹⁷ The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Leon Morris.

¹⁸ The word occurs in all of these verses: 1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor. 7:2; 11:3; Eph. 4:22; Jude 10; Rev. 19:2. In each case, the King James "corrupt." The Message translates the word as follows: 1 Cor. 15:33 - ruins; 2 Cor. 7:2 - defiles; 2 Cor. 11:3 - led astray; Eph. 4:22 - rotten; Jude 10 - destruction; Rev. 19:2 - corrupted.

This is a call for reflective living. Don't live in denial. Accept reality.

Paul is concerned that a Christian might measure himself against the wrong standard and come to the unwarranted conclusion that he is wise, just because his perspective matches that of the world around him.

To that Christian, Paul has some sage advice: ***[18b] If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.***

The wisdom of the world will never grow into the wisdom of God. The ladder is leaned against the wrong wall.

If we want to become truly wise, we have to first climb down, reposition the ladder, and see the world and life as God sees it.

The wisdom of this world says that this life is all there is, and it's all up to you to do the best you can to make the most of it.

The world around us looks at the message of the Gospel with its promises of eternity with God and forgiven sin and a changed life, all because of Jesus - and pronounces it "*foolish.*"

The world says that a life centered on God and eternity is bankrupt, a house built on sand. To which Paul says, ***[19a] For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the sight of God.***

If we are going to become wise builders of God's work on earth, we've got to know that we are going to be constantly bombarded with messages that contradict what we read in Scripture.

Paul's message?

Get used to it. Get used to ignoring cultural chatter. Tune in to God's frequency and pay attention to His wisdom.

True Wisdom (vv. 19b-21a)

[19b] For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE BY THEIR CRAFTINESS"; [20] and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE THOUGHTS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE useless."¹⁹ [21a] So then, no one is to be boasting in people.

That's Paul's final "jab" at the Corinthians for claiming membership in the Paul, Apollos, or Cephas club.

True wisdom, God's wisdom, sees the foolishness of partisanship - and of anything else that works against love and the unity of Jesus' body on earth.

We are to strive for unity and run toward maturity and toward love and toward each other even in - especially in - our disagreements.

Of course this is hard to do. Unity (just like love and patience and forgiveness) is most necessary at precisely the moment when it is most difficult to pursue. So, Paul gives us something to chew on the next time we are tempted to violate unity.

The Universe's Pecking Order (3:21b-23)

The possessions of the Christian (vv. 21b-22)

[21b] For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come; all things belong to you.

Earlier this week, I had to laugh when I read this verse, because I thought of all the membership interviews I've had with people who choose to join Northwest.

At the end of the time together, either I or the Elder with me will usually say something like, "*Welcome! You now belong to (meaning you're a member of) Northwest.*" - which is exactly the opposite of what Paul says here.

I should say, "*Congratulations! Northwest now belongs to you.*"

¹⁹ A quote from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11.

The three men Paul named - Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter) - were influential leaders in the early church.

The reality is that these heavyweights “belonged” to those to whom they ministered, not the other way around. Paul wasn’t their chief. Paul was the Corinthians’ chief servant.

On the one hand, sure, we can say that we belong - as a member - to Northwest. But the better way to understand what’s really going on is that Northwest belongs to YOU.

You are the church. You are the work of Jesus in this local expression of Jesus’ body. You are the Children’s Ministry, the Youth Ministry, the Women’s and Men’s ministries, ESL, Missions, Music - and all the rest.

It is each one of us, using the gifts and talents and passions God has given us that gives THIS “body” its shape. It is each one of us, cheering each other on to do what is on our hearts to do for Jesus that forms Northwest.

And then, lest any of us get the idea that we are at the top of the universe’s totem pole, there is this.

The One who possesses the Christian (v. 23)

[23] and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.”

All the things that we “own” are ours only because we are in Christ, who is Himself God, yet who is also under God the Father, the Sovereign over all.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the second member of the Trinity, saw fit to submit Himself to the will of His Father.

So, we, Jesus’ people, see fit to move away from self-centeredness, embrace the foolish wisdom of the Gospel together and press forward into a life of unified service, love, and worship.