



Building God's Temple

No. 9
Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

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Nathan Carter

Text

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 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.

Introduction

A few years ago Andrea and I watched a *History Channel* show called "The Men Who Built America." We learned about Cornelius Vanderbilt and his railroad empire, John D. Rockefeller the oil tycoon, Andrew Carnegie and his steel company, J.P. Morgan and his impact on banking, and Henry Ford who revolutionized the automobile industry. These giants of capitalism helped build the United States into the global superpower it is today.

There's nation building. There's body building. There's team building. We build wealth, build a platform, build a brand. We talk about building a family. There's a job search site called CareerBuilder. What are you building?

These ways of building something can all be good and God-glorifying enterprises. But none of them are of utmost significance. Nations rise and fall. Bodies age. Money, as they say, can't be taken with you. If your life is ultimately about building those things, then you will experience total loss one day. Today's passage in 1 Corinthians tells us that the greatest building project you can be part of is building the church.

And I don't mean swinging a hammer or hanging drywall in a construction project for a structure with a steeple. I have in mind what Paul talks about later in this letter in ch. 8, v. 1 when he says, "[L]ove builds up." Or in ch. 10, vv. 23-24 where he says, "Not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." That's the kind of building up I'm talking about – love, seeking the good of others. Or in ch. 14, v. 4 when he says, "the one who prophesies [speaks God's Word] builds up the church." Or in 14:12 – "strive to excel in building up the church." Or 14:26 which says, "Let all things be done for building up." It's a metaphorical use of building. The old-fashioned term is to "edify" or "edification." It's spiritually

stabilizing, shaping, strengthening the people who comprise the community called the church.

That's what Paul's talking about today in ch. 3, vv. 10-17. In short, what we're going to see is just this: **building the church is the best use of your life.**

Let's pray...

Context

Let's remember where we are. We're looking at a letter that was written from the Apostle Paul to a specific local church in the first century city of Corinth. The assumption throughout the NT is that the Christian life is the church life. To be a Christian is to be part of a particular church.

This church in Corinth was one that Paul himself had planted. He came to Corinth and preached the gospel and some people believed. And so he gathered and organized them into an established church.

Like in any church comprised of sinners, there were issues, weaknesses, fault-lines – factions were forming, cracks in the walls. Paul hears about this and writes to address it. He says they're acting worldly, according to human wisdom. He reminds them that they have the Spirit, but last week he said they're acting like people of the flesh. They're immature, he said, like babies still drinking milk when they should be ready for solid food. He then switches metaphors and talks about planting and watering and growth. He says the Corinthian church is like a garden. Look at v. 9 – “You are God's field.”

But then Paul switches metaphors again and adds, “God's building.” And that's what he runs with throughout the section we're looking at today. He moves from an agricultural to an architectural image. Paul's going to talk about building. But who's doing the building? And what are they building on? And what are they building with? And what are they building for? And what are they even building? Those are the questions we're going to answer as we walk through this text.

Who Is Doing the Building? (v. 10)

First, who is doing the building here? Take a look at how v. 10 begins. “According to the grace of God given to me...” So who is really behind this building project? God is. Paul's already been clear that there's no room for boasting in the Christian life. Our salvation is entirely of God's grace. But even the things we do after our salvation as a result of our salvation are still God's grace working through us. God is the ultimate builder. Remember what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:18 – “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” What a pledge! This building project has all the backing it needs to be completed. God the Father has guaranteed it. Christ has promised it. And the Holy Spirit is insuring and empowering it.

So God is doing the building, but let's keep reading. Paul says, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation.” Paul was not inactive in the building. He was fueled and guided by God. But he was still involved. God uses people to do the building.

Go back and look at v. 9 again – “For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.” Fellow workers with God. The “we” there included Paul

and Apollos – leaders, teachers in the early church. These men were tools that God used in the beginning stages of the building process. We could probably add Cephas in to the mix here, based on ch. 1. Paul, Apollos, Cephas (one of Peter’s other names)... these were apostles and pastors, preachers with some kind of up front platform ministry. They were skilled master builders. The Greek word is *architecton*, from which we get architect. These types of people are crucial in the process of building. They get things started. These are the people we might say are ‘in the ministry’. God uses planters and pastors and professional workers who are trained and experienced and dedicated to ministry. Praise God for those people in your life and in the life of the church. They are critically important.

So God is the ultimate builder. And he uses influential people like pastors. But those aren’t the only people doing the building here. Look a little closer. “[L]ike a skilled master build I laid a foundation, *and someone else is building upon it.*” So Paul is not the only one doing the building. Someone else is building too. Then he says to the Corinthians, “Let *each one* take care how he builds upon it.” He’s not saying, “I and Apollos and Cephas are the professionals. Don’t try this yourself. We’re the builders (with God’s grace); sit back and watch us.” No! He’s assuming that everyone in the church is playing some part in the building process. He doesn’t say, “Let no one else try to build.” He says, “Let each one take care how he builds.”

So who is doing the building? God... through people... and not just a few select people, but all of God’s people. Every member of the church has a role to play in building. Everyone is on the construction crew. Nobody’s supposed to be sitting on the side watching. Paul uses similar language in Ephesians about building. And he says in Ephesians 4:11 that God in his grace gave different leaders who initiate the ministry of the Word in the church, but their job is not to do everything for everybody, but to get the ball rolling, “to equip all the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

So nobody can sit back and say, “God’s going to build this thing; we don’t have to do anything.” No, he uses people. And not just those certified religious guys who went to seminary and have titles. Every Christian is called to construction. Every believer is supposed to build. Who’s doing the building? Everyone.

What Are They Building On? (v. 11)

Second question: What are they building on? That’s the most important question for any kind of building project. Have you ever tried to build a tower of blocks on plush carpet or a Lego house on your bed? Not a good idea. Jesus told a parable about a wise man who built his house on a rock and a foolish man who build his house on the sand (cf. Mt. 7:24-27). You need to have a solid foundation.

One of my favorite buildings here in Chicago is The Rookery, designed by the famous and innovative Burnham and Root and completed in 1888. Chicago was a booming city, the fastest growing city in the world in the 19th century. It needed to go up. But there was a problem. Chicago is swampland. So they employed a new method of construction that began by laying a grid of iron rails in a thick bed of concrete, spreading the load of the building over a wide area of the soft soil. Another of my favorite buildings is The Monadnock, also built by Burnham and Root in 1891, the last and tallest skyscraper with masonry load-bearing walls. And it’s still standing and stable today after

over 130 years. Later, architects and engineers developed the caisson system that allowed buildings like the Sears Tower to reach over 100 stories by going over 100 feet down to the underlying bedrock with over 100 of these pillars that rested on the subterranean limestone.

In any construction project you have to have a good foundation. In this construction project that Paul is talking about here, he says in v. 10 that he laid a foundation. And in v. 11 he says there's actually only one kind of foundation that can be used in this kind of work. "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Have you ever noticed how Jesus plays all the roles in the Bible? In different metaphors he does it all. He's the Shepherd and the Door for the Sheep (Jn. 10:1-16). He's the High Priest offering the sacrifice and he's the sacrifice that's being offered (Heb. 7:27). He's the Judge (Rom. 2:16) and the Defense Attorney (Rom. 8:34). And in this building metaphor he's the one causing the building to happen and he's the foundation on which the building is being built. He's everything!

By saying that Jesus Christ is the foundation on which this building must be erected, Paul makes it clear that everything in this edifice must rest on him. You can build a community on many things. You can build a company on talent. You can build a friend group on a shared interest. You can build a cult on personality. You can build a neighborhood on shared values. You can build lots of things on different kinds of foundations. But this thing that Paul was calling the Corinthians to be part of building had to be built squarely and exclusively on Jesus Christ.

The real Jesus. Be careful. A lot of people may talk about Jesus, but it's not the real Jesus. There's a poster at just down the street on the northwest corner of Roosevelt and Morgan that's been there for years. It says, "All Muslims Believe in Jesus Christ, The Messiah Son Of Virgin Mary, Alive In The Heavens And Going To Come Back Soon To Lead The Believers." It's saying, "Hey, we believe in Jesus too." But that's not the full picture of Jesus. That's a modified or truncated version of him. It's similar with Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons who deny the full deity of Jesus. And there are Liberal Christians who talk a lot about Jesus, but it's Jesus as a moral exemplar. And there are a lot of legalistic Christians who talk about Jesus, but he's also just a moral teacher too (they just pick other parts of his ethical teachings that they like).

What does Paul mean by Jesus Christ? Well, he said earlier, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). Not just Christ, but Christ and him crucified. A Christ who died to save sinners. Notice the death of Christ was completely absent from the Muslim description. The Cross is central to our understanding of Jesus and his significance. And you see: a crucifixion that accomplished something had to be done by someone who was fully God and fully man. This is Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Savior foretold and foreshadowed throughout the OT and who came in the flesh to fulfill all righteous, then died as a substitute and rose again to prove it all and who will come again to judge the living and the dead and bring those who put all their hope in him into his eternal kingdom. To say that the only foundation is Jesus Christ is another way of saying this whole structure rests on the gospel. The gospel, the good news of what God has graciously done in Jesus Christ, is the sole footing that everything else is built upon.

What Are They Building With? (v. 12)

So this section is about building. We've seen who's doing the building. We've seen what they're building on. Next question: what are they building with?

Verse 12 lists 6 different examples of building materials. It says, "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw..." Paul gives a sample of materials you could use to build with.

You've all heard the tale of "The Three Little Pigs," right? One pig built his house with straw. One with sticks. And one with bricks. Which one was best? The bricks. Which items in this list of 6 in v. 12 seem solid and enduring? The first 3, right? Which items are combustible and/or flimsy? The last 3.

Imagine you drove 100 caissons down to the firm bedrock underneath Chicago and created a sturdy, massive base. And then you gathered branches and made a lean-to hut with a grass thatched roof on top of this enormous foundation. That would be incongruous, wouldn't it? It wouldn't fit. A grand substructure calls for an elaborate superstructure, right? It just makes sense that you'd build upon an immense and unprecedented foundation with materials that were fitting.

What is the meaning of gold, silver, stones... wood, hay, straw in this metaphor Paul is using? Well, since the foundation is a Person, as defined by propositions, then it makes sense that the building materials would be propositions that appropriately connect other people with that primary Person. Put it this way: since the foundation is the truth of the gospel, then gold, silver, and gems in the rest of the structure would be teaching that connects to the gospel. It's the outworking of the gospel in people's lives. Wood, hay, and straw would be teaching that doesn't match well with the gospel. It doesn't quite fit.

Paul came to Corinth and preached the gospel – Christ crucified. This established the church. Now others are supposed to continue building the church by fleshing out the gospel and applying it and elaborating upon it with teaching that aligns with and flows naturally out of the gospel. Paul stayed in Corinth for just 18 months. He started from scratch there and planted a church. But he said he didn't really do much baptizing. They needed to figure out how to baptize people, what form of church polity to have, what weekly worship services were going to look like, how to counsel people with all kinds of issues stemming from living in an immoral culture, how the gospel impacted broken relationships, how to do church discipline, how to think about spiritual gifts, what a godly marriage looked like, how to think about sexuality, how to interact with the idolatry all around them, how to practice the Lord's Supper, etc... Those are all theological questions that required biblical processing and working out the gospel into all areas of life and bringing it to bear on more and more people. It's taking and teaching positions on stuff like that that is mostly in mind in the metaphor of gold, silver, precious stones... wood, hay, and straw.

What Are They Building For? (vv. 13-15)

Okay, clearly Paul's talking about building. Who's doing the building? God... through people like Paul *and* through ordinary members in the church. What are they building on? Squarely on the foundation of the crucified Christ, the gospel. What are they building with? Truths that are congruent with the gospel. Next, what are they building for? The answer here is: an eternal reward.

Paul says that the quality of our building will be evaluated on the Last Day. In v. 13 we read – "[E]ach 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.” For the believer who is working on the foundation of the gospel, there is no fear of condemnation on the last Day. You cannot be damned on that Day. The fires depicted here are not of punishment but of assessment. No Christian should fear facing Jesus on the last day.

But there will be an evaluation of what you did in your Christian life. Paul says in 4:5 that even our motives will be exposed. At the judgment seat of Christ believers will get everything sorted out. You will have forgotten much of what you did or wonder if it was helpful; God doesn’t forget anything and will show you what you really accomplished. You will find out if you were right about certain things or not. You will finally see what effect your life had in the kingdom.

Paul goes on – “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward” (cf. v. 8b). What is the reward? It’s the pleasure of seeing the fruit of your labor. It’s hearing, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Doesn’t that sound nice? It’s the joy of knowing you were part of something meaningful. Have you ever built something and then stood back and looked at it and thought, “By God’s grace, that turned out well?” And it endured. Maybe a piece of furniture that you made that has lasted and weathered well. Maybe a kids’ treehouse that stayed standing through the storms like we had Thursday night. Maybe a section of code you wrote that didn’t crash the program, didn’t throw errors when you ran it. That’s the happiness in heaven being described here. It’s an added satisfaction in the new world that your work in this world contributed to something eternally meaningful.

Verse 15 says, “If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” Notice that “[i]t is the builder’s ‘work’ (3:13) that will be burned up, not *the builder* himself.”¹ This is talking about genuine believers who are exempt from all wrath because they are in Christ. But some of what they built with is showed up to be not quite right. There will be no sadness in heaven. No regret. No envy. It will be all thrill just to be there. But there will be gradations of joy, different levels of rewards. Some who are saved will have more of their work burned up than others. We’ll all be like, “Phew! I’m glad that is over. Wow! I was way off on that stuff. I messed up on this. I dropped the ball there. But I’m here!! Praise God!!!” And we’ll all see how our lives did or didn’t contribute to the building.

Let’s recap: each believer is building, building on the foundation of Christ. But some are building with cheap materials in shoddy ways. That work will be burned up. What does this mean we should be building for? We should be building for the satisfaction of a job well done, which will be enjoyed in heaven when we see what it all did.

What Are They Building? (vv. 16-17)

Finally, what exactly is being built? I’ve been a bit vague. I’ve hinted here and there. I’ve said we’re building the church. But what is a church? Let your eyes land on v. 16. After all this talk about building, Paul says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” This is not talking about individual believers being temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul will talk that way later in ch. 6. But here the “you”s are plural. Y’all. The church at Corinth was a temple, a dwelling place of God.

This brings together the agricultural and architectural metaphors beautifully. In the OT, the Garden of Eden is described like a temple, a holy place where God dwelled. And later the massive edifice that Solomon built, the temple, is described as having garden-like details – carvings of gourds and open flowers, palm trees (cf. 1Kngs. 6). Solomon’s temple was built on great, costly, dressed stones for its foundation (1Kngs. 5:17) and then added on top of that was gold, silver, and precious stones (1Chron. 29:2). It was a majestic building. But it represented something even more glorious than gleaming marble. It was the symbolic home of God himself.

Here Paul is saying that the church in Corinth, not the brick and mortar building (they probably didn’t own one), but the collective body of believers, was the dwelling place of God. God’s Spirit inhabits the church. Therefore, this is of the utmost importance and significance. It should be given the highest attention. The church should be constructed and maintained with greater care than the house of any other high-ranking person – the White House, the Kremlin, Buckingham Palace.

If someone planted explosives at the Oval Office, what would happen to him? Look at v. 17 – “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” People who seek to destroy the church from without or from within by attacking the foundation, God will punish severely. So there are three categories of people in this text: those who build with solid material and are commended, those who build with flimsy materials and barely make it through, and those who destroy and are destroyed. Which one do you want to be?

Application

If you’ve never put your trust, leaned all your weight on Jesus Christ, that is the call of this passage on your life today. Whatever you’re building your life on is sinking sand and won’t withstand the Final Day. You will have nothing to stand on. Come to Christ and come into his church today.

For many of you, you have done that. This passage pleads with you to give yourself fully to this project of building up the church. **Building the church is the best use of your life.** It is the temple of the Living God. Nation building, body building, team building, building wealth, building a platform, building a brand, building a family, building your career... those things won’t really matter on that Day. What the Bible says you will care about then is how your life contributed to the building up of the church. Is that how you’re living? I fear that many of you are not giving much thought to building up the church. You’re more concerned with building your own life, your own career, your own family, your own personal palace.

We’ve seen in this text that every member has a responsibility to build the church. Yes, people like me who preach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). But everyone has a responsibility to be doing Word ministry. I preach this sermon. And the effect should be that you take it and run with it and apply it within the life of the body. Let’s get real practical here as we close.

Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” You need to be soaking in Scripture. Don’t just let this sermon go in one ear and out the other. Dwell on it. Don’t let this sermon be your only Bible intake all week. Read, meditate, reflect on Scripture... so that you will

have things to share with people when they lose their job, get a cancer diagnosis, get caught up in sin, are discouraged and depressed....

1 Thessalonians 5:11 – “Encourage one another and build one another up.”

Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’.”

Ephesians 4:25 and 29 – “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.... Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” Is this your m.o.? Are you praying every day for the other members of the church and then reaching out to them to see how they’re doing and how you can speak truth into their lives?

Are you meeting with people with the intent of doing each other spiritual good? Or are you isolating or hanging out but doing it just like the world would? Are you minding the mortar, the relational connections of the different living stones that make up this temple (cf. 1Pe. 2:5). Are you actively trying to collect other stones to come be part of the church? That’s evangelism. The Bible uses this metaphor in multiple ways.

Are you seeking to build up the community in Christ? Or are you seeking to build community on some shared interest, like every other community out there in the world? Do you care about the church flourishing and thriving? Is that evidenced in your lifestyle, where you spend your time and energy? Are you fully invested in this? Sometimes people care and want a church to grow and be healthy, but they try to do it with worldly wisdom. That’s wood, hay, and stubble. Sometimes people see areas for growth in a church, but just criticize. Don’t complain, contribute! Show up and be intentional. Pursue relationships. If you feel like you’re in a place where you need to receive people’s encouragement, then share yourself, open yourself up and be honest about your struggles so that others can speak into it.

There are myriads of ways that you can be part of building the church. Give yourself to it. Bring every other pursuit in your life underneath this one. Your civic engagement is to preserve a society within which the church can flourish. Your physical health is so that you can have energy for ministry. Your money is for serving the kingdom. You have kids to teach them to be part of the family of God. Your career is a place to witness. But it’s all subservient to your goal to see the local church healthy and multiplying.

Building the church is the best use of your life. At the Last Day, when we all get to heaven, don’t you want to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You used what I graciously gave you to build into something that will last forever.

Historians tell us that more than twenty-three generations were required to complete the glorious Canterbury Cathedral of England. We know that men sometimes worked all their lives on a portico or a vault or a series of pillars, understanding their labors as an offering to God. And when they were about to die, they often asked to be taken to the place they had worked in the cathedral. With their family gathered around them they would pass their tools to their sons and commend the next generation to further progress on that tabernacle of God. Then, in peace they would pass from this life.²

Fellow members of Immanuel Baptist Church: we are working together on something that is grander and more glorious than any earthly edifice. And one day we will all be able to see the end product. All our mistakes will be burned away. And what's left will be breathtakingly perfect – the people of God dwelling with God forever and ever.

Building the church is the best use of your life. I pray that you will use your life well.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, May 18, 2025. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 157.

² Stephen Mansfield, *The Search for God and Guinness* (Nelson Publishers), 256.