

Christians as God's Temple

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1-23

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their 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 person's work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." ²¹ So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.



Key Text

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

—1 Corinthians 3:11

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 3: Christians and Sacrifice

Lessons 10–14

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Define *wisdom* and *foolishness*.
2. Explain how Jesus is the foundation for Paul's ministry.
3. Make a plan for honoring God's temple—his people.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Strong Foundation
- B. Lesson Context

I. Careful Work (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

- A. Many Builders (v. 10)
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- C. Various Material (v. 12)
- D. Fiery Test (vv. 13-15)

II. Holy Temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

- A. What's So (v. 16)
- B. So What (v. 17)

III. Deceitful Wisdom (1 Corinthians 3:18-23)

- A. Human Thinking (v. 18)
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- B. God's Knowledge (vv. 19-20)
- C. Paul's Assurance (vv. 21-23)

Conclusion

- A. God's Earthly Temple
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Strong Foundation

My grandfather owned a real estate company, but his first love was general contracting. He was a frugal and conscientious man, deeply shaped by the Great Depression. As a result, he always advocated doing things well and right the first time. He believed in making things that would last.

When I was 12 years old, my grandfather invited me out for a drive around our town. We spent the day visiting the buildings his company had constructed over the years. We saw office buildings, shopping centers, and apartment complexes. My grandfather would tell me an interesting story about each building and its construction.

Just before dusk, we pulled into a neighborhood that, at first glance, seemed filled with large, new houses. But as we drove on, the houses became smaller and older. We finally stopped at a small, two-story home with blue siding and a gray roof. My grandfather said, "I built this house for my parents when I was 19 years old. It still stands today because I built it with care on a strong foundation. Everything that lasts has a strong foundation."

I've never forgotten my grandfather's lesson. In every pursuit, one's work only lasts if the foundation is strong.

B. Lesson Context

Paul's second missionary journey began as a trip to visit the congregations he had planted on his first journey (Acts 15:36). After doing so (15:41), the restless Paul desired to move on to new territory with the message of the gospel.

God influenced Paul's itinerary through a vision that directed him to cross the Aegean Sea to the region known as Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). Paul eventually arrived in Corinth in about AD 52, where he remained for some 18 months (18:11, 18). Corinth was a busy and wealthy center of trade in Paul's day, a cosmopolitan city with residents from many regions. It was a place of lax morals and influential pagan religions.

Acts 18:4 tells us that Corinth had a synagogue (as was the case in most of the large trading cities

of the Roman Empire). Paul began his preaching in that synagogue, which was composed of both Jews and Greeks (18:4-5). But opposition caused him to leave and focus on the Gentiles of the city (18:6-7). Nevertheless, there was a strong contingent of Jewish believers in the Corinthian church (18:8).

It was to this mixed congregation that Paul wrote the two Corinthian letters while on his third missionary journey. The four years that elapsed between Paul's time in Corinth and his first letter back witnessed the development of ungodly trends—trends that needed to be corrected.

I. Careful Work

(1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

A. Many Builders (v. 10)

10a. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it

Here, as elsewhere, Paul affirmed both divine *grace* and human responsibility in the success of his ministry (example: 1 Corinthians 4:7). His line of reasoning that follows further develops the point of 1 Corinthians 3:5-9: the apostles were co-laborers, not competitors. Paul was the one who had “planted” (3:6), while Apollos came later and had “watered.” That’s another way of saying that Paul was the one who *laid* the spiritual *foundation* of the church in Corinth, and Apollos subsequently built *on it* (Acts 18:24-26). Thus, this verse reiterates the distinct but complementary roles of the two men.

In describing himself as *a wise builder*, Paul uses a Greek word found nowhere else in the New Testament. But we find the word in two non-biblical documents of the time between the Old and New Testaments. One reference is Sirach 38:27, which has the word side by side with its weaker form: “carpenter and workmaster” (another translation has “artisan and master artisan”). The other reference is 2 Maccabees 2:29, which compares the roles of “the master builder of a new house” to that of the one who paints it later. The additional word *wise* further strengthens the concept. Paul’s suitability for his task was due to his initiative in study



Visual for Lessons 10 & 11. Display this visual as you discuss the lesson context and the travels of the apostle Paul.

(Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5-6) and God’s actions (Galatians 1:11-17).

10b. But each one should build with care.

This warning introduces the argument that follows. We don’t know whether by saying *each one* Paul is speaking to leaders of the factions of 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 or is issuing a general caution.

B. One Foundation (v. 11)

11. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

The opening *for* implies that what comes next explains or provides the rationale for the warning of the previous verse. One must take care of how one builds upon the foundation Paul laid because that *foundation is Jesus Christ*. Paul here probably does not refer only to particular doctrines about Christ (though those are certainly included) but to Christ himself. Every subsequent builder must treat this unique foundation respectfully (compare Ephesians 2:20).

What Do You Think?

What vetting process should a church enact before permitting a new ministry to start?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture can you cite to support your response to that question?

A Foundation Too Strong?

In the spring of 2023, a builder constructed a house near San Antonio, Texas, with a massive two-story foundation. Built of stone blocks, it lifted the house into the air, enabling it to tower above its neighbors in the suburb outside the city.

Some in the neighborhood thought that the house would have a huge basement, but in fact, it was a one-story ranch house with no basement. The general consensus was that the builder was trying to solve issues with the terrain. But the house with the odd foundation also contributed to the feeling that the new owners would be snobs looking down at everyone from a higher vantage point. However, they would be better protected from earthquakes, intruders, and door-to-door salespeople. After all, only the most dedicated would take the time to climb the stairs to the front door!

Our lives are strong and solid when built on the foundation of Jesus. However, the similarities end there. We do not look down on our neighbors from a high vantage point when we build our lives on him. Instead, we place ourselves squarely in the trenches with everyone else. How's your construction progressing? —L. M. W.

C. Various Material (v. 12)

12. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,

Having drawn attention to this foundation, Paul turns again to the issue of the quality of the construction. The metaphor's emphasis now seems to be durability, which depends on the material used.

Investigating the list of six materials here, we see two general types: precious and durable (*gold, silver, costly stones*) and common, not durable (*wood, hay, straw*). Just because a sincere, devout Christian leader is building a ministry on the proper foundation of Christ doesn't mean that that ministry is valuable and durable. It's not enough to be sincere—a builder may be sincerely wrong.

D. Fiery Test (vv. 13-15)

13. their 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 person's work.

A feature of the materials just listed is their combustibility or lack thereof. While gold, silver, and precious stones are not good conductors of heat, the materials of wood, hay, and stubble readily burn. This is important because *each person's work* will undergo divine testing by *fire*. The *Day* that Paul has in view here is the "day of the Lord," the time when God comes to judge the world and save his people (1 Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:2). The Scriptures use the imagery of consuming fires to describe this day of judgment (Isaiah 66:15-16; Malachi 4:1; 2 Peter 3:10).

14-15. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Paul describes the results and consequences of various qualities of work in helping build the Lord's church. Superior works will survive God's fiery evaluation, and their builders will *receive a reward*. The opposite will be true of the work that *is burned up*.

It is essential to clarify that this reward and its counterpart, suffering *loss*, are not related to the issue of whether one receives eternal salvation. This concept is evident in the phrase *but yet will be saved*. Instead, Paul is suggesting that there will be varying levels of rewards in Heaven and different degrees of punishment in hell. Paul is referring to the idea of varying rewards (compare Luke 19:16-19). For the concept of varying punishments, see Luke 12:47-48 (compare and contrast 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 22:12). The distinction between works that survive and those that will be *burned* is appropriately understood within this context of varying consequences.

What Do You Think?

What would be a good "fireproof test" of a ministry you're considering participating in?

Digging Deeper

How will you be attentive to the Holy Spirit's leading in this test?

II. Holy Temple

(1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

A. What's So (v. 16)

16. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?

The lesson to this point has proceeded from Paul's metaphor of Christians collectively (the church) as "God's building" in 1 Corinthians 3:9. The verse before us identifies the specific kind of building that is the church: *God's temple*.

The importance of this designation is not to be missed. The Old Testament depicts the temple and its predecessor, the tabernacle, as having a sanctuary as the place of God's dwelling (Exodus 25:8; 29:45-46; Deuteronomy 12:11; etc.). There was a certain realization, of course, that this was not to be taken in a 100 percent literal sense (1 Kings 8:27; Isaiah 66:1-2, quoted in Acts 7:48-50; compare 17:24). Even so, the transition from describing God's presence in a temple of stone to the reality of God's presence in a temple of flesh and blood was startling. It might even have been incomprehensible to those who had had a lifelong focus on an inanimate structure of stone serving that purpose. This would have been true of Jewish and pagan temples as a residence of the deity.

Although the Greek behind the words *you* and *your* are plural, Christians collectively form one body (1 Corinthians 12:13), one temple. Paul is consistent on this point (2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22; etc.).

What Do You Think?

How do you recognize threats to God's temple?

Digging Deeper

What role should the concept of holiness play in that regard?

B. So What (v. 17)

17. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

Paul brings home his point of the previous verse.

Since those of the church in Corinth are God's temple, any actions that *destroy* it will incur God's wrath. The twice-used word *destroy* translates the same Greek word, which can also mean "defile." The serious nature of the consequences thereby underlines the serious nature of the offense. This passage thereby served as a veiled warning to those in the church of Corinth promoting factionalism. By threatening the integrity of God's temple, they risk coming under God's judgment.

III. Deceitful Wisdom

(1 Corinthians 3:18-23)

A. Human Thinking (v. 18)

18. Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise.

Paul begins to draw together the threads of his argument for unity and against factionalism. The opening salvo here warned his audience against self-deception. Such self-deception may involve circular logic. Consider this hypothetical conversation:

Sam: "I'm the smartest guy in this church!"

Ann: "How do you know that?"

Sam: "Well, the smartest guy in the church would know who the smartest guy in the church is, wouldn't he?"

A primary way to avoid self-deception is to acknowledge that the wisdom that comes from God is the filter through which the wisdom of the world must pass, not the other way around. Thus, the readers have a choice to make. The wisdom of God never changes. The world, however, changes constantly; what's right today may or may not become wrong tomorrow. This is a problem that presents itself anew to every generation: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight" (Isaiah 5:20-21).

Paul recognized that problem and its inevitable outcome when he quoted Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Corinthians 1:19: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will

frustrate.” His argument there goes on to contrast God’s revealed wisdom with Greco-Roman cultural norms. Thus, his appeal was for them to cease depending on the norms as proper human standards of conduct. Cultural norms of the day promoted discrimination, but God’s people must not do so (James 2:1-9). Self-aggrandizing wisdom must be rejected in favor of pursuing God’s wisdom. His wisdom does not elevate one person over another or divide the community. Though the world may label the Corinthians fools for such a pursuit, they will conform to God’s standards and prove themselves truly wise. Paul addresses this contrast again in Colossians 2:8, 20-23 and 1 Timothy 6:20-21.

My New Year’s Resolution

Several years ago, I posted my New Year’s resolution on social media. The resolution was this: “I’m going to work on developing a sense of humility that I can be proud of.” Everyone immediately got the joke: humility and pride are polar opposites—they don’t mix. It’s laughable to attempt to do so.

In one sense, I am indeed wise in ways that the world counts as wisdom. I have four academic degrees, including a PhD. I have the experience of having lived on planet Earth for 69 years. I retired from the Air Force at a high rank. The list goes on. But—and this is crucial—I’ve also read the Bible systematically word for word, cover to cover at least a dozen times. Any trust that I might place in worldly achievements is quickly challenged and extinguished by God’s Word.

God’s Word has a way of doing just that—but only if you let it. Here’s an idea on how to get started: read what the New Testament writers have to say about the concept and source of *wisdom* and what it means to be *wise*, as it uses those words dozens of times. When you choose to begin that journey, it will reveal how seriously you see this issue. How about starting right now? —R. L. N.

B. God’s Knowledge (vv. 19-20)

19. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”;

As signaled by the word *for*, Paul explains his rationale for the counterintuitive claim that one

must become a fool to be wise. In so doing, he flips the script: the world may consider God’s wisdom foolishness, but *the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight* (compare 1 Corinthians 1:20). Readers first need to see the stark nature of this either-or choice in order to make the right decision.

Paul cited two Old Testament passages to support his claim. The first comes from Eliphaz’s speech in Job 5:13. There, it forms part of a series of statements that emphasize God’s counter-cultural standards of justice. While the world despises some people as less important than others, God upholds the cause of the lowly and places them “on high” (Job 5:11). Likewise, God saves the impoverished and the weak from those who are stronger (5:15). In the process, God subverts the schemes of those considered wise and “crafty” (5:12-13), trapping them in darkness (5:14). In its context, then, Job 5:13 illustrates the same dynamic of dramatic reversal of fortunes and the inferiority of human wisdom that Paul evokes in 1 Corinthians 1–4.

What Do You Think?

How do you discern whether or not the church begins to shift to worldly wisdom?

Digging Deeper

How do you keep personal preferences from slanting your conclusion?

20. and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”

A similar dynamic also stands behind the second quotation, which is Psalm 94:11. The context of that passage witnesses the psalmist asking how long God will allow powerful, wicked people to perpetrate injustices (94:3). The chapter goes on to emphasize that God does indeed see what the wicked are doing (94:8-9), including all their schemes (94:11). He will bring judgment upon them (94:10). This passage thus strengthens Paul’s warning that those who consider themselves wise by earthly standards need to pursue God’s wisdom instead. Paul, therefore, does not simply proof text in 1 Corinthians 3:19-20. Instead, he quotes these passages with sensitivity to their original contexts.

C. Paul's Assurance (vv. 21-23)

21a. So then, no more boasting about human leaders!

Paul's conclusion is clear in this verse, the crescendo to his argument: desist from creating factions around particular *leaders*. To do so is inconsistent with God's standards of wisdom and the unity he desires for the church.

21b-22. All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,

After having just stressed a negative, the apostle immediately provided a positive and encouraging reason to avoid factionalism by declaring that *all things* belong to his original readers (compare Romans 8:32). Those "things" include the leaders *Paul*, *Apollos*, and *Cephas* (another name for Peter per John 1:42), around whom the factions had formed (1 Corinthians 1:12; 4:6). They were all servants of Christ for the sake of the church, not rivals competing for followers.

The other five items have parallels in the list of "things" Paul stated could not separate believers from the love of God in Romans 8:38-39. Four of these—life, death, present, and future—overlap in meaning. The *world* may parallel the "demons" and "powers" in Romans 8:38, which could refer to spiritual forces exercising dominion in the present age (Colossians 2:15). The followers of Christ are not subservient to any unholy forces.

23. and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

While "all things" belong to the Corinthians, they belong to a higher authority (compare 1 Corinthians 15:23; 2 Corinthians 10:7; Galatians 3:29). This implies that they must answer to Christ. They do not have complete freedom but are expected to live in a manner that pleases him.

How to Say It

Aegean	A-jee-un.
Cephas	See-fus.
Corinth	Kor-inth.
Maccabees	Mack-uh-bees.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
Sirach	Sigh-rak.

Christ represents the highest authority of all, namely, *God*. Paul thus reiterates that the body of Christ must recognize God's authority in how it conducts itself as God's earthly temple.

What Do You Think?

What is the first step you will take should you see factionalism in your church?

Digging Deeper

How will you know whether your impression is correct?

Conclusion

A. God's Earthly Temple

Paul composed this letter about two decades before the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Yet even before the temple's destruction, the earliest Christians believed that God was with his people rather than in a physical building (Acts 17:24). Yet today, the Holy Spirit, given at baptism (2:38), resides in each person who trusts in Jesus as Lord. Therefore, Christians, collectively as the church, are God's temple on earth.

We have the duty and privilege of bearing God's presence in and to the world. Therefore, we must live in a way that honors ourselves and our fellow Christians. We avoid division and factionalism, especially when motivated by the values of the world. God will call to account all who dishonor his temple. Let us conduct ourselves in the world as those in whom God dwells.

As we do, we remember that we answer to God, not to the court of public opinion or cultural trends. We need to think only of shifts in cultural values that have resulted in shifts in church doctrine to see the tragedy of failure in this regard.

B. Prayer

Father God, thank you for choosing to live in us as your temple. Teach us to honor one another as those blessed to carry your presence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We carry God's presence in the world.