A WISE BUILDER

1 Corinthians 3:1–23

Key Verse: 3:11

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

Have you ever thought about what your life is based on? We all live with so many unspoken assumptions. We think we’re doing well if we see positive things—good finances, a nice family, or some achievements. We may rely on our family background, connections or smartness. But what lies underneath life’s surface is crucial. In today’s passage Paul continues to counsel the Corinthian Christians about their issues, and one of the main ones was their being divided. They were trusting in human leaders to give them legitimacy and make them better than others. Paul calls them back to the true foundation of Christian life. We want to learn from him how to build our lives and our ministry wisely on Jesus. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In 2:6–16 Paul writes about how God has given us his Spirit to understand his wisdom and give us the mind of Christ. But then he has to get real with them. Read 3:1–3a. Their reality was that they were still infants in Christ. Paul calls them “worldly.” We usually think of “worldly” as being materialistic or pleasure-seeking. But in Greek the word is literally “fleshly.” It’s a contrast to living by the Spirit. When we repent and believe in Jesus God gives us his Spirit, but as we live out our day-to-day lives we have to choose whether to live by the Spirit or to live by our fleshly desires. In this context being fleshly doesn’t mean just giving in to physical desires, but to self-centered, human desires.

Read verse 3b. According to these verses worldly people are jealous of others and they quarrel. The Bible calls jealously and quarreling “acts of the flesh” or the sinful nature (Gal5:19,20). Spiritual people aren’t jealous of others. Spiritual people don’t argue with others. But this is what the Corinthians were doing. Paul their shepherd rebuked them.

What were they struggling about? Read verse 4. This was their main issue: who they followed. Paul had already mentioned it in 1:11–13. Paul got the church in Corinth started; later, Apollos came after Paul left and also taught people. After that, some people compared the two. Some thought it was more spiritual to be associated with Paul. Others thought Apollos was much more intellectual and a better speaker. They took two good leaders and turned it into something bad.

Read verse 5. We need to see those who minister in the church not as spiritual superstars to be celebrated, but as “only servants.” They themselves are not the point: they are serving God, and serving people. Those who are full of themselves can’t really be useful in God’s ministry.

This verse also mentions the main work of these servants. It’s to help people believe. It means to believe in Jesus. When we’re going to get involved in ministry, the main focus of all our work needs to be helping people believe in Jesus (Jn6:29). Without that as the outcome, all our work is frankly in vain. At one time or another we all have needed a servant of God to help us believe in Jesus. The focus is not on that servant, but on believing in Jesus. In verse 5 Paul mentions how God assigns to each servant his or her “task.” Servants of God share the same goal, helping people believe, but they’re called by God to a specific task in achieving that goal.

To help us understand Paul uses a metaphor. Read verse 6. In growing crops, some people are assigned the task of actually planting the seed. It’s hard, back-breaking work. But it’s only the beginning. Others have the task of watering the seed. It requires diligence and patience. The seed is the word of God, and watering it may refer to further explanation or love. In ministry we need planters but we also need care-givers. Jesus used the same analogy when he told his competitive disciples about sowers and reapers (Jn4:36–38). Read verse 7. Paul brings the focus not on those who plant or water but on God who makes things grow. Even if great skill or strength is used to plant or water seed, only God can make it grow. In the same way, without God at work in ministry, all our labor is in vain (Ps127:1). Paul emphasizes that only God enables people to grow. God uses servants, but it’s really God doing the work. Why get sidetracked into focusing on comparing planters with waterers when the point is God? Read verse 8. The shared goal of God’s servants is to help people grow to mature faith. But the rewards for God’s servants vary. It depends on each one’s labor. People don’t really know how to reward because they can’t see everything. But God does. God sees everything and God knows exactly how to reward his servants. We shouldn’t compare God’s servants but trust God to reward them rightly. Read verse 9. This is Paul’s conclusion to a church divided over its leaders. Church leaders aren’t competitors; they are “co-workers in God’s service.” Church members aren’t rivaling factions belonging to differing leaders; they are all “God’s field, God’s building.” This is the spiritual way to see God’s church.

Next, Paul turns to the importance of foundation-building. Read verse 10. By God’s grace Paul was a spiritual pioneer, helping new people believe in Jesus. But now he uses another metaphor—this time it’s not agriculture but construction. In home construction people like to focus on the choice of building materials, on how everything will look. Wood or brick or glass, how many rooms, how high the ceilings, or the flow or the views or the landscaping. But the most important aspect of home construction is actually the home’s foundation. It may seem boring, and it can’t be seen. But without a well-built foundation, everything else collapses. What’s the point of spending money and effort on design, finishes and fixtures when the foundation is bad and everything will be ruined? This is why a wise builder gives first priority to a well-built foundation.

What’s Paul really talking about? Read verse 11. What does it mean that Jesus Christ is the foundation laid for us? The Bible says elsewhere that Jesus is our rock of salvation, our cornerstone. Without Jesus no one can be saved (Ac4:12). It’s not a matter of our skill, wisdom or ability—it’s about Jesus. But what does it mean to really have Jesus as our foundation? The only way is to repent of our sins and put our faith in him (Heb6:1; Ac2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 20:21; 26:20). No amount of good talk or intentions or cleverness will do—our repentance and faith in Jesus have to be real. Many people make the mistake of trying to keep certain rules in order to be saved. In the early church it was circumcision. Later, it became keeping the sacraments. Good outward activities, such as serving the needy, going to church, praying, giving offerings or even teaching the Bible, can’t make up for having a real foundation in Jesus through repentance and faith. Just as a house needs an inspection to see the quality of its foundation, so each Christian needs to check on the quality of our spiritual foundation in Jesus.

Another way to have a solid foundation in Jesus is to obey his teaching. For this reason Jesus himself taught the parable of the wise builder. He said in Matthew 7:24–27: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” To have Jesus as our foundation we have to keep listening to his words and putting them into practice in our daily lives. Many people deceive themselves by just listening to Jesus’ words on Sundays; but to have a real, solid foundation in him we actually have to do what he said (Jas1:22).

Jesus needs to be the foundation not only of our personal lives but also of our ministry. Read verses 12–15. Here Paul is no longer talking about the foundation but about using quality construction materials. If we use cheap building materials to go the quick and easy way, the building won’t last. Likewise, if we keep our Christian life superficial, for a while things may seem okay, but in the end, everything will be exposed. Here, Paul’s analogy may also refer to how we conduct ministry. Some people try to use money to help people stay in the church. In America many churches in urban areas have tried to be ethnic community centers for people. They kept immigrants tied to their original culture, helped them adjust to the new world, gain language skills, get jobs and find marriage partners through networking. But in the end such churches die out after people make use of them. The real focus is not on Jesus and his teachings but on people’s survival and comfort. It’s quicker and easier to try to build a church on giving people benefits. But the fire of hardships or persecution always expose such flimsy construction. We can’t be offering people cheap housing or the hope of marriage and truly help them stay committed to Jesus and the work of his kingdom. We can’t be using trendy teachings or slick productions. We need to do the hard work of helping people build a quality spiritual foundation in Jesus through repentance and obedience to his words. There’s really no substitute for it. No amount of fun or culturally relevant programs will do.

Verses 12–15 also teach us that each of us will be held accountable to God for how we built our lives and ministry. “The Day” refers to the day when Jesus comes again. On that day his light will expose everything, including what our spiritual foundation is, the quality of our Christian life, and our motives. On that day he will also give us our just reward. We need to build our spiritual lives and our ministry with that Day in view.

Paul goes on to give another important teaching to this divided church. Read verses 16,17. It’s a grave sin to try to destroy God’s sacred temple. It may sound extreme, but actually when we start attacking fellow believers, this is what we’re doing. We need to acknowledge that together we are God’s temple; God’s Spirit dwells in our midst. We need to work from this basic truth and have awesome respect for the community of his people. Finally, in verses 18–20 Paul comes back again to the issue that divided this church—depending on human wisdom (1:20ff.). Crafty people always seem to get ahead. They act quickly and try to grab the best for themselves first. But God is actually in control and he knows better than even the craftiest people. Paul wants to put an end to their divisions. Read verses 21–23. In Christ all things are ours! And we are not of people, we are of Christ, and Christ is of God! So there’s no need to be divided.

Read verse 11 again. May God help us to be wise builders who build our own spiritual lives and our ministry on the only lasting foundation, Jesus Christ. In this way may God make us a united temple of his Spirit and use us as a blessing to the lost in this generation.