

Eternal Reward: Each According to His Labor

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Broadcast Dates: April 24-25, 2024
Steve DeWitt

I was privileged this week to minister to the staff of Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF). In the terms Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 3, they are the planters. Last year, around 3 million children professed to believe in Jesus under their ministry. They are committed to reaching children for Jesus. We are studying 1 Corinthians and in chapter 3 Paul begins to confront the huge problems in the Corinthian church. First on the docket are divisions in the church and their habit of pledging allegiance to human teachers and leaders instead of Christ. Some said they were of Paul. Some said they were of Apollos or Peter. There was a serious groupie mentality in the church. To this Paul says, we're just workers in the field, we can't make anything grow spiritually. Give glory to the one who can do that and the only one who can do that is God. Put Him on the pedestal of your heart.

The Scriptures have a very serious word for us today. Your eternity will be influenced by how seriously you apply what it says. Let's go back to 1 Corinthians 3:11, *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ*. Paul was a tentmaker by trade and he saw in buildings and houses and even tents metaphors of what the Church is like. He does that here:

The Foundation of the Church – The Person and Work of Jesus

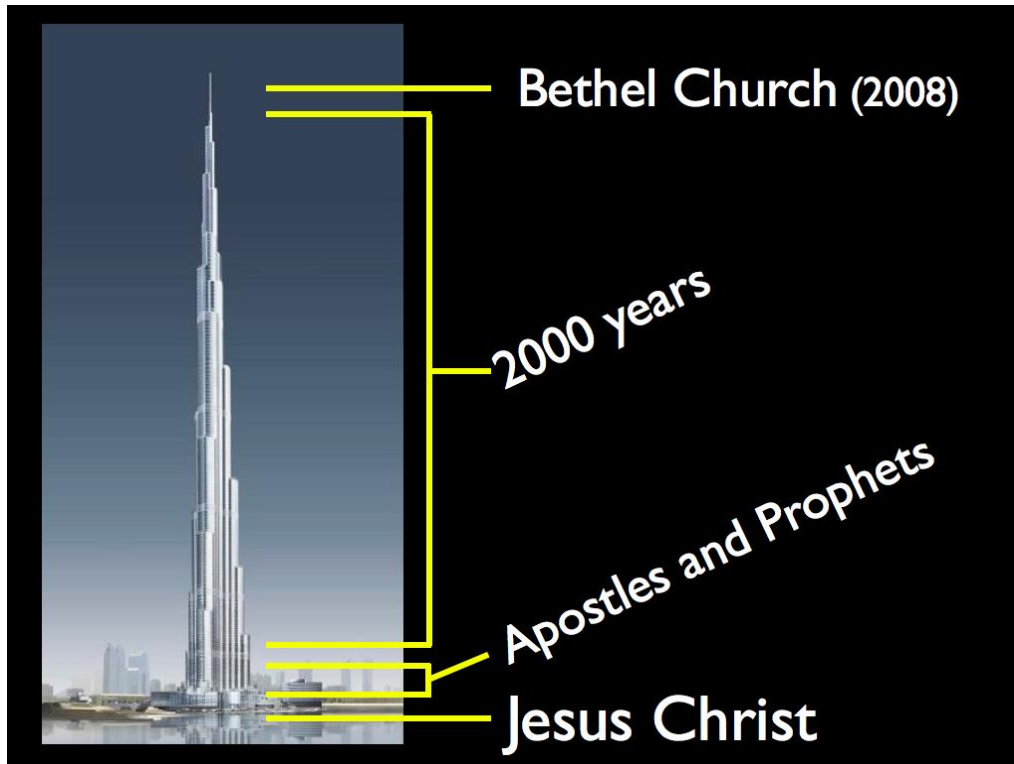
For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:11)

Jesus is the foundation of the Church. Who He was and what He did created a foundation of truth that not only saves sinners from the wrath of God but also supports all the other doctrines of the Church. The entire Christian worldview of reality has a starting point – The Person and work of Jesus. Everything has meaning as it relates to Christ – not just the doctrines, but the assurances and hopes those doctrines represent to us. Not just the hopes and assurances, but the people who believe them. People like you and me.

In the building metaphor, the Church is built upon Jesus and His gospel and consists of people who have believed in Christ. The Church is being built upward over time with layers or floors of construction built by God's people. Evangelism adds to the superstructure. Discipleship strengthens and supports the superstructure. The doctrine of love holds it all together.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19-21)

Perhaps a visual will help here:



This is the Dubai Tower. It is under construction. Jesus is the foundation of the Church. Next would be the ministry and teachings of the Apostles and Prophets, much of which we have to this day in the Bible. For 2000 years, this structure has been under construction. Look at where we are now; we're one brick on the 2008th floor. If you'd like to know more about this story, we will have the link on our website to my message on the history of the church from three months ago (*HIStory: The 2000 Year Story of the Church*, August 31, 2008).

Why is the Church so valuable? Its value is derived from its foundation. It is built on holy ground; the precious blood of our Savior. The Church is a holy temple, not because of us, but because of Him. It rises as a tribute to His love, sacrifice, mercy, power, beauty, and infinite worth. In 1 Corinthians 3:17, it says, *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him*. That's a sober warning.

Might we pause for a moment of application? God clearly treasures the Church. Do we? God's priority in this world is to display His glory in the building of His church. Jesus made it clear that even the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Jesus intercedes for His Church and longs to return for her. The Spirit of God is expanding the Church by bringing millions of people to faith. The lives and ministries of Christians represent the brick and mortar on the ever expanding building. God treasures the Church. Yet all too often even professing Christians seem to view the Church on the same level as the other organizations and activities in their lives. There is a kind of casualness about the way they choose to be involved or not; serve or not. What does casualness about the Church and about the Great Commission reveal?

Some family members of mine recently visited Shanksville, Pennsylvania where United Flight 93 crashed on 9/11. You probably know of the actions of the passengers that saved either the White House or the Capitol Building. Imagine you were a member of the White House staff on 9/11 and you visited the crash site. What kind of emotions would you have?

They gave their life for yours. They are building a memorial there to the heroes of that flight. Do you think a White House staff person from 9/11 would be motivated to support it? Or would they be like, *Yeah, that's nice and if I can work it into my priority list, then maybe I'll help out too.* I would think Shanksville, Pennsylvania would always be a very special place because of how the sacrifice of others saved your life.

Our approach to gospel ministry and the seriousness with which we give it is the visible expression of how high we esteem what Christ did to save us. God treasures the Church. Do you?

Building on the Foundation – Take care how you build!

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. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—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. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Who are the Builders?

In the context of chapter 3, the primary builders are church teachers and leaders who are called to build up the church. Paul calls himself a skilled master builder. The Greek word is "architecton." Sound familiar? An architect is one who carefully designs and supervises the construction of a building. As an Apostle, Paul "architectoned" the foundation of the gospel of Christ in the ground.

Verse 10 says, *Someone else is building on it.* No name is given here and perhaps that's the point. Whoever is leading, teaching, serving, building the Church or a local church is building on the foundation that Paul and the Apostles laid. For 2000 years, others have been building on it.

I don't think Paul only had an elder or pastor in view. He is writing to all the Corinthians and wants them to realize that they too are building the Church. At least, they should be. Any commercial construction site has slackers who appear to be doing a whole lot of nothing. Churches have all kinds as well. Christians are either good or bad builders. They are either hard working or lazy. Which might you resemble?

What are the building materials?

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—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. (1 Corinthians 3:12-13)

The list of building materials includes six items. They go from most valuable to least valuable; gold to stubble. Notice what is true about the last three, especially as it relates to fire. They all burn up and there is nothing left of them. On the other hand, what is true of gold, silver, and precious stones? They will survive a fire. Three are flammable and disintegrate. Three of them are permanent and endure. Paul is drawing an analogy from

building and fires. When a fire engulfs a building you find out what in the building is permanent. The fire tests the quality of the material and the quality of the workmanship.



Did you see this picture after Hurricane Ike went through the coast of Texas this year? It's not a fire, but it says the same thing. How do you know which house had a good foundation? Which one had good builders? Which one was constructed well? How do you know which house had good materials? The one that survives. The one that lasts.

All the ministry we do and all the life investment we make falls into those two categories, lasting or not. Gold or hay. Eternally enduring or temporal.

Paul tells the Corinthians that there is a Day coming when the quality of our service for God will be tested by fire. This is known as the Day of the Lord. Old Testament prophecies speak often of it. The New Testament describes it as a final judgment. For Christians, though, this is a different judgment than what unbelievers will face. Unbelievers will face what Revelation 20:11 calls the "Great White Throne Judgment." That judgment is a moral judgment and all will be judged "according to what they [have] done." Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, all who face the Great White Throne Judgment will be judged guilty and will be sent to hell. Friends, that will be a terrifying day.

That is a different judgment than what Christians will face. Romans 8:1 says *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. Our judgment is not one of condemnation but of commendation. Rewards. This day is known as the **Judgment Seat of Christ**.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

“Judgment seat” translates the Greek word *bema*. Maybe you have heard it called the *bema seat judgment*. This is a judgment of works, not to salvation or punishment, but for rewards. That’s right, the New Testament is filled with teaching that God promises to reward His servants based upon their service for Him during their lives on earth. This is the “Day” Paul refers to in verse 13. Fire is an apt picture because fire’s characteristics are similar to God’s judgments. Fire is completely impartial. It’ll burn a rich man’s house and a poor man’s trailer (as it did in California last month). God’s judgment will have nothing to do with social status, education or human celebrity. It will weigh opportunity, giftedness, resources available, stewardship, motivation, and sacrifice. In other words, God is going to review and reward faithful and sacrificial service and He is NOT going to reward the lazy and selfish servant.

This is the point of the Parables of the Talents and the Minas which I don’t have time to tell but many of you know (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). The Master rewards the good and faithful servant and severely chastises the servant who didn’t do anything with the opportunities and gifts He provided him. He calls that one lazy and wicked. The Bema Seat Judgment of Christ does not decide who is saved and who is not (John 5:24) but who has built well in their life and who didn’t. There will be eternal rewards for those who do and there will be the loss of rewards for those who do not.

We need to consider this very seriously. This day is coming. A final exam. We will stand before God and give an account of our lives. Our service for Him will pass through a fire of perfect justice, knowledge, and wisdom. What we did and why we did it will be weighed by God. Everything we did for Him will be meticulously considered. Big sacrifices and small ones. Martyrdom and small cups of cold water. Nothing in our lives escapes His notice or His promise to reward faithfulness AND not to reward laziness.

What do you think of that? Does the thought of eternal reward motivate you to work on the superstructure or not? God intends it to be a strong motivation to serve Him.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:14-15)

Verse 14, if properly understood, would radically change many of our lives. If the investment of our lives in the kingdom of God is done well and with the right motive, we WILL receive a reward. It is a promise from God.

What a wonderful thought. How we live here today echoes with reward from God in eternity. Did you know that? I would guess many of us at the very least, don’t consider this near as much as we should. Yet the Bible is filled with exhortations to us to serve and sacrifice in such a way that we will receive a reward on that day.

- *“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.” (Revelation 22:12)*
- *He will render to each one according to his works... (Romans 2:6)*
- *And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)*
- *...knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. (Ephesians 6:8)*

- *The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants... (Revelation 11:18)*
- *Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25)*
- *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14)*

These and many more tell us that God is a generous rewarder of His servants. We'll have another message on this and get into what these rewards are and the criteria for them. The point is that they are commensurate with our service for Him.

The question is, how ready are you? The Bible acknowledges that some will not be ready. *If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:15)* This is the wood, hay, and stubble-builder. It's not that he didn't do anything; he just didn't do anything that would last. The imagery is vivid. It's like a man leaping from a burning building to save his life only to turn around and watch the inferno burn up his life's work. Nothing he spent his life on survives. All the days and years and opportunities and things he thought really mattered; All of them are gone. He is saved but has nothing else to show for his life.

He "suffers loss" in that he suffers the realization of what his life could have meant for God, and what his time could have produced for God, and what his talents and treasures could have done for God if his life on earth had been lived differently. He looks around and sees the reward that could have been his and the commendation from Christ he could have received. Nothing will be better in that moment than looking into the face of our Savior and hearing, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Right now you may be thinking, *Well, at least I'll make it, even if I don't get a reward.* I tried to think of a good word to describe knowingly living your life in a way that you have nothing to show for it. I struggled with whether to pick idiotic or stupid. You really have to wonder if someone knowingly aims to be the saved-but-suffer-loss person, is Jesus really their Lord and Savior? What other explanation is there for someone who plans to fail?

It's like a guy I knew in college who was an education major but never studied or worked at all at his studies. My friend asked him, *Larry, how are you ever going to teach in a school if you never study?* He replied, *What, you didn't have bad teachers in school?* It's just foolish to live for things that don't last. And we all do all too often. Think of this last week, did you do anything that God will reward you for? Any gold moments of ministry? Silver acts of service? Precious stone moments of compassion? Or was your time this week spent mostly on wood, hay and stubble?

We will spend some time on the degrees of reward in heaven in a later message. I have a great burden today for those that it seems to me are building so little or nothing at all. I am not the judge, but there is one. I believe that if things don't change, you will look at how you spent your time in this fleeting life and call yourself a fool. It is out of love that I want to challenge you to give your life to things that last and do it for a reward "where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20).

Think about your week ahead. What can you do this week to make the most for eternity? Why not ask God to help you live as Jim Elliot exhorted in his famous saying, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Or like the plaque on the wall

of my home growing up, “Only one life ‘twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© Steve DeWitt, 2024. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include The Journey (<http://thejourney.fm>) or Bethel Church (<http://www.bethelweb.org>) website on the copied resource.