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1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Fifth Message

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# BUILDING UP AND TEARING DOWN A CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In our studies in Paul's first Corinthian letter we are in the midst of a discussion of two kinds of wisdom, the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. We saw in chapter 2 that it is only God who understands life. He knows the secrets of life that enable us to live with grace and beauty. He has revealed these hidden insights to the apostles, and through the process of inspiration we have recorded for us in the Bible the wisdom of God. It is on this wisdom that we ought to base our lives, our marriages, our families, our businesses. All of life needs to be rooted in the word of God.

But instead of incorporating this wisdom of God into their thinking the Corinthians had adopted the wisdom of the world. Rather than the church invading the world, the world had penetrated the church. One area where this was evident was in their wrong view of Christian leadership. They were far too ready to spotlight one individual over another and play one off against another. They needed straight teaching on the nature and function of Christian leadership.

It is critical that the church have a correct perspective on the nature of authority, and chapters 3 and 4 of 1 Corinthians give us great insight into that subject. This idea of getting a right view of leadership reminds me a story that Ray Stedman shared at a staff meeting once. A certain man telephoned a church and said to the secretary, "Tell me, who is the head hog at the trough?" The secretary was taken back by the man's question, and feeling a little indignant, replied, "That's not the way we refer to the Right Reverend Johnson." The man said, "I don't care what you call him. I have a check for \$10,000 that I want to give to the church and I want to know who's the head hog at the trough." The secretary responded, "Oh, well, here comes the big pig down the hall right now!" That story always helps me keep the issue of church leadership in proper perspective.

As he corrects the false wisdom of the Corinthians, Paul's fertile and imaginative mind calls into play several vivid metaphors, three of which are contained in the verses we will look at this morning: the metaphors of a child, a field, and a building. All three symbolize the church, and all refer to the growth to maturity that the church is designed to experience. Each begins in a small, insignificant way, but the expectation is that in time each will grow into beauty and significance.

A principle arises out of each of these metaphors. We find the first principle in verses 1-4 of chapter 3.

## I. Jealousy and strife are the fruit of following the world's wisdom

**And I brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you**

**not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Cor 3:1-4 NASB)**

Paul says that the Corinthians are not acting as spiritual men. Now they are believers. Paul addresses them as "brethren." They possess the Spirit, but they are not following the Spirit's direction—walking in the Spirit and demonstrating the unity of the Spirit. They have responded to the Spirit's call but they have not understood the implications of that call. They do not have a vision of what God has already done in Christ. Thus they are acting, as Paul says, like "mere men," "men of flesh," "babes in Christ," "fleshly." These people are believers, but they have not learned how to allow the Spirit to control their lives. They live life on the basis of their natural abilities. By "flesh," Paul does not mean the physical body alone. He is speaking of our fallen humanity, all the selfish desires we inherited in our natural birth.

This was not an issue when the apostle first came to Corinth. The fact that they were acting like mere men was not a problem then, because that is characteristic of a new Christian. As we learned last week, the mind of Christ is not something we immediately possess when we come to Christ. That comes as we study, understand and obey Scripture. It takes time to think like God thinks. It takes time to gain his perspective on the things we face in life. Growth in the Christian life is a process. My 15-month-old son Timothy has a way of telling us when he wants something: he yells at the top of his lungs! At his age he cannot communicate his needs with words. So, though we don't enjoy his screaming, we understand it. But when my 10-year-old acts that way, I am concerned. That is the apostle's point here. The problem is that although years have gone by, the Corinthians are still thinking like natural men. They should have grown up by now.

According to Paul, the grounds that put these Corinthians on a par with non-Christians is the presence of jealousy and strife among them. Jealousy and competition is the natural way in the world. And jealousy was widespread in the church. They were constantly looking over their shoulders, envying each other's gifts. There was little love and a lot of competitiveness. There was a lack of appreciation for the different contributions brought by God through people like Paul and Apollos. That is widespread today as well. We want appreciation. We want everyone to notice us. We want to be applauded. Instead of being content to serve quietly where God has placed us we become jealous of how God is using others. We long for positions of prominence. We worship our heroes and their gifts and think if we could imitate them we would be powerful like them. That is how we act without Christ. Jealousy and competition is the natural way of the world. That is the way most companies operate. But Jesus said that will not be so in the church. The Spirit of God desires to change all that when he takes over a life. There was such a dependence on men and man's power in Corinth, but that was all fleshly, says Paul.

I was interested in the remarks that James Baker, the Secretary of State, made at the National Prayer Breakfast recently. This man passionately confessed that power does not really bring fulfillment, as people think it does. He talked about the fleeting nature of power, and said that this was brought home to him one morning when he was being driven to the White House in his limousine. He noticed a man walking alone, and he said, "This man was someone everyone of you would recognize, a chief of staff in a previous administration. There he was, alone—no reporters, no security, no adoring public, no trappings of power—just one solitary man alone with his thoughts. That mental picture continually serves to remind me of the impermanence of power. The man had it all, but only for a time." He concluded, "Inner security and true inner fulfillment come by faith, not by wielding power." That is what Paul is saying. This man knows the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world.

Galatians 5 gives a list of the works of the flesh, and the fruit that comes from the Spirit's control in our life. As I looked at them afresh last week I was taken back by the number of characteristics that had to do with relationships. Paul writes there in Galatians 5:19-22 that "the acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness."

Jealousy was Cain's sin. He resented God's acceptance of his brother, and his eyes filled with rage as God smiled on Abel's sacrifice. Jealousy leads to destruction. It will destroy a friendship, it will dissolve a romance. It can foster competition and bitterness in a church choir. It can ruin a church. Remember James' words in 3:13-14: "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness (or the humility) of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth." Whenever the idea of promoting myself reigns, I am aligning myself with the wisdom of the world, and damaged relationships will be the result.

Ruth Harms Calkin reveals our hearts in this poem,

You know, Lord, how I serve You  
With great emotional fervor  
In the limelight.  
You know how eagerly I speak for You  
At a women's club.  
You know how I effervesce when I promote  
A fellowship group.  
You know my genuine enthusiasm  
At a Bible study.  
But how would I react, I wonder,  
If You pointed to a basin of water  
And asked me to wash the calloused feet  
Of a bent and wrinkled old woman  
Day after day  
Month after month  
In a room where nobody saw  
And nobody knew.

Those final words, "nobody saw, nobody knew," are the key to the wisdom of God.

Our second principle is revealed in Paul's second metaphor.

## II. Humility and cooperation are the fruit of God's wisdom

**What, then, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants, through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God, who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (3:5-8)**

Here we have revealed to us the correct view of ministry and of ministers. How are we to view leaders? I say that in the plural because the New Testament always speaks of a plurality of leadership. You never see one man controlling a church in the New Testament. That point of view is condemned by John when he refers to Diotrophes "who loved to have the preeminence." Scripture teaches that the church is led by a team of men who share authority equally and teach and serve in harmony with one another. How do we view them? Do we put them on pedestals, give them titles and separate them from ordinary people? Do we think they have some special hot-line to God? Are they the head hog at the trough?

Notice how Paul asks the question. He does not ask, "Who is Apollos?" or, "Who is Paul?" but "What is Apollos?" and "What is Paul?" By doing so he immediately defuses the personality cult controversy. Some of the Corinthians looked up to one leader and some looked up to another, but Paul is quite clear—they both were servants. We wait on tables to serve you, says Paul. We wait on God for our instructions. We move at his bidding. He has assigned to us our responsibilities.

Paul sees ministry in God's kingdom like working on a cooperative farm: "I planted," says the apostle. He planted the gospel seed there at Corinth and a church was begun. "Apollos watered": Apollos irrigated the crop through his teaching ministry. "But God gave the growth." Sowing and watering are human activities. Anyone can do that. Even a child can sow and water, but only God can cause growth. Which is more important, evangelism or Bible teaching? Paul's answer is, neither. The important thing is not what each of them can do, but what God alone can do! Only God can take that truth that has been implanted in people's lives and use it to change them. He is the one who works in people's hearts.

Therefore we are not in competition with one another. "He who plants and he who waters are one." We are working together. Peninsula Bible Church is not in competition with Valley Church or First Baptist of Los Altos or Menlo Park Presbyterian or Los Gatos Christian. The pastors in this church are not in competition with one another to see who has a more effective ministry. We are working together, serving one another. We are not threatened by your leadership or the use of your gifts. In fact your success and effectiveness in ministry is our greatest delight. I have served in churches where the pastor felt so insecure he would not allow home Bible studies or other ministries to take place without his approval because he was threatened by that.

Our greatest joy as a staff is your success in ministry. That doesn't threaten us; it thrills us. It would not surprise me that there are some people here this morning who have greater teaching gifts than anyone on our staff. That would cause us to rejoice. A young man in our body has taught our home fellowship this past month and I feel he

has been much more effective than I have been in leading the study. It was wonderful to watch him. He had people talking who hadn't said a thing in months! We want to encourage that. It doesn't matter to us even if someone chooses to go to another church. If God uses another person to touch a life in a way that we couldn't do, we need to rejoice in that. The important thing is that people grow, not who gets the credit for it.

In verses 9-17 Paul switches from an agricultural to an architectural metaphor. And here is our third principle:

### III. Leaders must be careful to model and teach the wisdom of God

**For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man'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 man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (3:9-17)**

Laying the foundation is comparable to planting. Just as God gave Paul the task of planting the seed of the gospel in the hearts of the Corinthians, so God in his grace enabled him to lay the foundation for a strong church. A building needs both a foundation and a superstructure. Apollos is now building a structure upon the foundation that Paul laid.

It is important to understand that in this passage Paul is not talking about building individual lives, but about building a church. Verses 12-15 are commonly interpreted as referring to the quality of an individual Christian's life. In this context, however, Paul is describing the quality of workmanship done by those who contribute to the building of the church. Thus Paul gives a warning, not to individuals, but to the leaders in the church: "Let each man be careful how he builds." This is addressed to anyone involved in leadership in the church at Corinth. It can be done well or wrongly. Paul has done his job. He has laid the foundation by clearly proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified. His reason for doing that was to ensure that the faith of the Christians in Corinth rested securely on the power of God, on Jesus himself, the only sure foundation, not the persuasiveness of men.

Once the foundation has been securely laid, the building must go up. Paul laid the foundation, "and another man is building upon it."

Two wrong ways in which this can be done are pointed out in this passage. First, one can tamper with the foundation: "for no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid (emphasizing that man has no choice in the matter of the foundation of the church), which is Jesus Christ." You could construct a community of people on another basis but it would not be the church.

The second way in which a builder may go wrong is by using inferior materials in the superstructure. Unworthy material will be exposed, says Paul. He sees the day coming when the true nature of every Christian's work will "become evident" and will be plain for all to see, "because it will be revealed with fire." The fire "will test the quality of each man's work." It will not be a matter of how successful or effective or popular each one has been. The materials used will be exposed: Will they turn out to be "gold, silver, and precious stones?" Or will they actually be nothing but "wood, hay, and straw?" Combustible material will perish; the rest will abide.

Paul is speaking about the ministry of the servants in the body. Will the work of Christians in Corinth prove to be what God has done by his Spirit, or what men have erected by their own resources, for their own benefit and glory? It is easy to cover up the materials used in a building so that it looks sturdy and impressive. The Day will disclose it.

The question we need to ask is, how do we build with gold, silver, and precious stones? What are the permanent materials upon which we can build into other people's lives? I think I can safely say that no one here who has teaching ministry wants to build with wood, hay and straw. Whether you teach children in Sunday School, teach one of the women's Bible studies, or lead a home fellowship, all of us want to have ministries that are lasting.

We can discern from the context of Paul's argument in these chapters what exactly he is referring to. The wisdom of God is permanent; the wisdom of this world is temporary. One will abide; the other will burn up. Building with gold, silver, and precious stones is having a ministry and life centered in the wisdom of God. It involves teaching people these hidden truths in the word of God that will enable them to live life with grace and beauty. It is only God's wisdom that reveals how to have a fulfilling marriage. The world says this is done by finding the perfect mate who will meet all your physical, intellectual and emotional needs. But that is not the wisdom of God, is it? The word of God says that the way to a fulfilling marriage is not by finding the right person but by being the right person. Do you want a healthy ministry that will last? Then you will have to take the time that is necessary to invest your life in the Word of God: understanding, obeying, and communicating its truths.

This is what drew me to Peninsula Bible Church. I had been to seminary and I had worked in several churches. As a matter of fact I was on staff in a church in this area. I had a deep desire to have an effective ministry, and I realized that it was the Scriptures that change lives, but I didn't know them very well. I could gather a group of people and they would follow me, but I didn't know where to take them! What drew me here was that I knew this was a place where the Word of God was central to everything that was happening. What a privilege it is as a pastor to be encouraged to take time to study, to be surrounded by godly men and women who understand this book! It has made all the difference in the world in my ministry. If you are going to have a ministry that will be lasting and effective, then you are going to need to take the time to understand and obey and impart the hidden wisdom of God that is in contrast to the world's way of living.

We need to be careful to add that our eternal destiny is not at stake. Paul says that this man would "be saved," like a man pulled to safety through the smoke and flames of his burning house, for his salvation depends on God's grace, not his own works, but he would have nothing to show for all his labor. Nobody wants that. No doubt

every Christian's work is mixed in quality. No doubt we shall all be saddened to see much of our work burned up. But this should encourage us to take more care in how we are building.

These verses urge us to take seriously both the certainty of eternal life and the scrutiny which the Lord will bring to our daily service as Christians. He is passionately concerned for the church, his building, his people. It is his temple. His Spirit dwells in the church. It is not surprising therefore that he is prepared to "destroy" anyone who uses his God-given talents to suck the life out of his church and thus destroy God's temple. The church can be destroyed or defiled by the introduction of the wisdom of the world. Whenever we allow selfish ambition or the desire for position or power, or when we become angry because people don't recognize us for the great work we are doing, we have fallen prey to the world's thinking.

Martha Snell Nicholson's poem puts this beautifully,

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ  
And He shows me His plan for me,  
The plan of my life as it might have been  
Had He had His way, and I see.

How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,  
And I would not yield my will—  
Will there be grief in my Saviour's eyes,  
Grief, though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,  
Stripped of all but His grace,  
While memory runs like a hunted thing,  
Down the paths I cannot retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break  
With the tears that I cannot shed.  
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,  
I shall bow my uncrowned head...

Lord, of the years that are left to me,  
I give them to Thy hand.  
Take me and break me, mold me to  
The pattern Thou hast planned!

That should be the desire of our hearts—that we would follow the wisdom of God as it is revealed in the scriptures, and not be tempted to follow the wisdom of the world.

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