

“Foundations”

1 Corinthians 3:1-15 ¹

I'm sure you've noticed—from the color of our worship order, if nothing else—that we've begun the season of Lent on our way to Holy Week at the end of April. Our journey through the Gospels and Acts also continues on our way to Pentecost in June, and sermons throughout this period will continue to grow out of these twin journeys.

Although the text we read earlier is from Corinthians, it's connected to our twin journeys through the last few verses we read—1 Corinthians 3:10-15. That connection, as you may have guessed, is to the foundation images at the end of The Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus concluded the sermon in this way:

“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.”

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law (Matthew 7:24-29).

We'll get back to Corinthians, but first, notice the similarities between these two builders. Both builders were apparently equally impressed with the need for building a house. Both were resolved to build a house. Both may have built their houses in the same wadi. Both persevered until a house was built. On the face of it, the largest difference between the two houses was probably that one of them was built more quickly and with less trouble than the other. The main difference lay underground, out of sight. Later, both houses faced the same test, but the results were very different, and that, of course, is the point.

The person who builds a house on sand is not necessarily a bad person, but he or she is certainly short-sighted, choosing what seems to be the quickest and easiest way to build. Those who construct buildings are very much aware of the fact that the foundation is the most critical part of the structure. If the foundation of the building is not secure, it doesn't matter how well the remainder of the building is built, because as the ground beneath the building settles, the walls and the foundation will crack.

Choosing the right foundation for life and building correctly on it was the main point of The Sermon on the Mount. And Paul wrote in today's text that *“no one can lay any other foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3:11). You can lay another foundation, of course, but Paul is agreeing with Jesus that no other foundation will be able to stand up to the earthquakes and tsunamis of life.

Paul had several things to say about how we should go about building on the foundation that is Christ in this morning's text. Let's return to 1 Corinthians 3, beginning with verse 12: *“If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 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. 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.”*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 13, 2011.

It's at this point of considering various kinds of building materials that I want to add a piece from yet another journey to our consideration. This third journey is the Spiritual Strategic Journey we're taking together from January to June—and particularly the fifth prayer experience of that journey that many of our prayer triplets have studied this week.

That fifth session had to do with the expectations we have for ourselves as members of the Body of Christ, and it emphasized what many studies over the last fifty years have found—that congregations with high expectations of their members are much more likely to be effective, thriving, missional congregations than are congregations where expectations are few. That's another way of talking about building with “*gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw.*”

Building with “*gold, silver, and costly stones*” is analogous to having high expectations for ourselves, while building with “*wood, hay, or straw*” that will be consumed on the Day of Judgment is analogous to having few expectations. What we might call “gold-level” members are folk who understand that God's call is not to casual church connection but to committed Kingdom community.

Rick Warren has famously said that “A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a Great Church,”² and several years ago we took the Great Commandment and the Great Commission and distilled them into what we call “The Five Things Disciples Do Every Week.” Most of you know the Great Commandment and the Great Commission by heart, but just in case a review would be helpful, they go like this:

The Great Commandment: ²⁸ *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”*

²⁹ *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31).*

The Great Commission: ¹⁸ *Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).*

LOVE GOD; LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. These are the keys to the Christian life; and if you'll turn to the back panel of your order of worship, you'll see The Five Things we distilled from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission:

WORSHIP (*Love God*)

I will participate in at least one experience of corporate worship each and every week.

CONNECT (*Love your Neighbor*)

I will participate in at least one face-to-face spiritual accountability and study group each and every week.

GROW (*Love God*)

I will pursue the daily gladness of personal time in prayer and in the Word, as well as the equally glad discipline of tithing.

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 102.

SERVE (*Love Your Neighbor*)

I will intentionally use my gifts and abilities to build up the Body of Christ in at least one way each and every week.

GO (*Into all the World*)

I will live in the world in such a way that I engage in some sort of Great Commission activity each and every week.

Now we don't print these every week just to fill up space in the bulletin. We print them as a reminder of what it looks like to build with "*gold, silver, and costly stones*," so that you and I will remember to pay attention to living in this way in the church and in the world . . . each and every week.

With all this in mind, let's look again at our text in 1 Corinthians 3. If building with "*gold, silver, and costly stones*" looks like "The Five Things Disciples Do Every Week"—and it does—Paul gives us three diagnostic indicators here that we can expect to see if we're building with "*wood, hay, and straw*" instead.

Look at verses 1 and 2: "*Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*" The first thing we can expect to have happen if we neglect The Five Things is that we'll remain infants in faith, still eating baby food long after we ought to be eating food for mature adults.

Even as engineers sink their caissons deep into the earth under a river to reach the bedrock upon which to build a great bridge or tower, so it's necessary for us to dig deeply into eternal things in order to have foundational knowledge on which to build our lives. But knowing is not enough. The man who built his house on the sand had heard Jesus' words; but he didn't live them.

Often we listen and listen, but we fail to act. We want to observe, to see a spectacle, to listen to stirring music and a memorable message, but we want the listening to be enough. Yet simply to have the knowledge, to be able to give the "right" answers, is not enough. Without the obedience that follows knowledge, we're really worse off than we were before, having greater accountability due to greater information. Fine words are not a substitute for fine deeds. There is only one proof of love for God, and that proof is obedience (Matthew 7:21). To listen without obeying is to live on baby food.

Verses three and four show us the second thing that happens when we build with "*wood, hay, and straw*." Paul wrote, "*You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?*" (Some translations translate this as "*living like people of the world*.") The second thing that happens when we neglect The Five Things is that we take our eyes off of Jesus and begin choosing sides and following each other rather than the Master.

In the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Tolkien described the camaraderie of the Fellowship of the Ring, a diverse group banded together by a crucial and common cause. Though the members of the Fellowship differed in almost every way, they were united in their opposition to Sauron, the Dark Lord. In a scene omitted from the movie, a heated conflict broke out among the group. Harsh words were spoken. Axes were drawn. Bows were bent. Disaster almost overtook them as the members of the fellowship nearly destroyed each other.

When peace at last prevailed, a wise counselor observed, "Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still

oppose him.”³ Like the Dark Lord Sauron, the Dark Lord Satan shows himself most dependably in the discord that he sows among those who follow Christ. From the Garden of Eden to this very day, Satan has been about the business of turning “*gold, silver, and costly stones*” into “*wood, hay, and straw*” by developing factions and disagreements in the church. These factions and disagreements distract us from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, weaken the Body of Christ, and bring reproach upon our Savior’s Name.

While none of us is immune from such danger, those who are still eating baby food are the most susceptible to it. This was an early and perennial problem in the church that is frequently addressed in the New Testament and that is frequently faced in the church today as well.⁴

The third thing Paul identifies in our text that we can expect to have happen if we fail to practice The Five Things is that we’ll end up investing our lives in things that don’t really matter: “*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. 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*” (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren wrote that “God created the church to meet your five deepest needs: a purpose to live for, people to live with, principles to live by, a profession to live out, and power to live on.”⁵ Those are the five needs addressed by The Five Things, which are easily remembered by the words WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO.

When a Richter 6.4 earthquake rocked Coalinga, California on May 2, 1983, that quake taught architects some important principles. They discovered that houses that were bolted to their foundations withstood the earthquake with little damage, but houses that weren’t bolted to their foundations came apart. And in that observation, architects discovered that houses needed kind of a “living” relationship with their foundations—into them as well as on them, and they changed building codes accordingly.⁶

The Bible tells us that there is one, and only one, Rock on which we can safely build our lives (Isaiah 26:4, 44:8), and The Five Things are five anchors by which the foundations of our lives are secured to this Rock. Rick Warren continued: “If you are serious about fulfilling your purpose in life . . . you have to make space for God in your life. And if you’re going to make space for God in your life, you’re going to have to cut some stuff out. Some good stuff—not sin—good stuff.”⁷ In order to build well, we have to stay focused; we have to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing.⁸

My friends, let’s build our lives on the sure foundation of the Rock who is Christ, and faithfully build The Five Things into our days so that we stay anchored to those things which alone truly matter. Build with gold, my friends. Build with gold.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Fellowship of the Ring,” Book One of *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 451.

⁴ John 17:20-26; Romans 15:5, 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:2-4; Colossians 3:13-15; Titus 3:10-11; 1 John 2:8-13.

⁵ Warren, p. 136.

⁶ Earl Palmer, “The Foolish and the Wise,” *Preaching Today*, tape no. 54.

⁷ Rick Warren, online sermon, “Don’t Waste Your Life.”

⁸ C. S. Lewis once wrote that “One must keep pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important” (C.S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology & Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], p. 101).