



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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## STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

### Text

First Corinthians 3:10-23

### Topic

Believers are encouraged to build for God using the finest materials rather than settling for stubble

### Title

*“Don’t Just Stubble Through Life”*

## Introduction

I came across this list of slogans taken from church marquees:

- “Download your worries, Upload peace”
- “This church is prayer-conditioned”
- “Fight truth decay - Read your Bible today”
- “God answers knee-mail”
- “Body piercing saved my life”
- “Jesus died for ‘my space’ in Heaven”
- “For all you do, His blood’s for you”

Suppose for a moment that the first century church at Corinth had a marquee. Here are some of the things that, according to the apostle Paul, might be posted on it:

- “Babes in Christ”

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- “Still carnal”
- “Behaving like mere men”
- “Envy, strife, and division among [us]”
- “[Building] with wood, hay, and stubble”
- “[Defiling] the temple”
- “[Glorying] in men”

*Not very funny!* Instead of being a place of spiritual health and healing, the church at Corinth had deteriorated to be a place of division and defilement.

OK, so how could they get back on task? At the end of verse nine Paul suggested a new illustration when he said, “you are God’s building.” In the remaining verses of chapter three he will expand on it to help the Corinthians to evaluate a couple of things with regards to being both builders and the building itself.

It’s something we want to take heed to. **No church is immune from deteriorating and becoming something less than God intends.**

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 As A Builder You Should Evaluate The Materials You Prefer, and #2 As The Building We Should Evaluate The Ministry We Present.

#1 As A Builder You Should Evaluate  
The Materials You Prefer  
(v10-15)

There’s a huge problem in the building industry in Florida right now. The owners of new homes complain of a sulfur-odor. *That’d be no problem here!* It would compliment the smell of our water.

Drywall made in China is causing the unpleasant odors in the homes in which it’s been used and, in some cases, the fumes have destroyed electrical wiring and air conditioning units.

I’ll bet the contractors wish they’d never used that material.

The materials we choose and use to build in the church are even more important. This first section focuses on the quality of those materials.

1 Corinthians 3:10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

Paul was given the particular “grace,” or gift, of establishing churches. We need to be a little careful about establishing churches. You’re dealing with people’s lives, their spiritual lives. There needs to be a real leading from the Lord to establish a new work.

“Wise master builder” translates to *architect* but in usage the idea is more like the person we would call the General Contractor. Paul was given the plans and he established the foundation then turned it over to the others who would build upon it.

That would make all of us subcontractors who should “take heed how [we build] on it.” He’ll tell us what that means in verses twelve through fifteen but first he reiterated the importance of the foundation in verse eleven.

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

Paul never missed an opportunity to exalt Jesus Christ. There **is** no church without Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The church exists for Him, to exalt Him. Along the way we edify believers and evangelize nonbelievers, but that is not why the church exists. It exists for Him.

If a church gets away from the foundation the structure will deteriorate and fall. By ‘foundation’ we mean the fundamentals of our faith in Jesus; things like His being fully God and fully man, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His substitutionary sacrifice of Himself on the Cross, and His physical resurrection from the dead. Things like the authority of Scripture - its inerrancy, its infallibility, its inspiration.

Even if we remain orthodox, however, we can choose poor quality materials with which to build.

1 Corinthians 3:12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

So much has been written about exactly what these materials represent. Good, solid Bible commentators don't agree. For example:

- The “gold, silver, precious stones” could be the Word of God while the “wood, hay, straw” is the wisdom of the world.
- Or the more precious materials might be believers while the less precious are nonbelievers.
- Or the more precious materials might be referring to worthy motives while the less precious refer to unworthy motives.

Since we're not told exactly what these material represent we ought to understand them in their context. One thing to consider that is sometimes overlooked is that **all** these were possible building materials that were used in temples being constructed in the first century.

- “Wood” was used for doors and posts, “hay” was dried grass mixed with mud and used for walls, and “stubble” was straw that could be used as roofing material.
- “Gold” and “silver” referred to the costly ornamentation in temples while “precious stones” might refer to the granite or marble that would be overlaid with gold and silver.

Think of the projects around your house. There are always choices in materials. Some will do the job but won't last as long. You might choose them when you're putting your house on the market! Other materials have a much higher quality. You choose them if you plan on living in your house for a long time.

The point Paul was making seems to be this: **As a builder in God's Temple on the earth you can choose either costly or common materials which are either more or less permanent.**

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**In practical terms, when you serve in God's Temple, the church, you can do it in such a way that it costs you something. Or you can treat your serving as something common and ordinary. It's up to you what you want to put into your serving. Will it be something that speaks of excellence? Or of ease?**

You're going to want it to be costly rather than common and here is why:

1 Corinthians 3:13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

A lot of what goes in to building a structure is hidden. You don't know the quality of the materials unless they are somehow tested. Fire has a tendency to test the quality of the materials. Some stuff is more fire resistant.

We've all been outraged at stories of tragedy that might have been averted if the builders had not cut-corners in their choice of materials. If only they had used the best stuff the folks trying to escape a fire might have had enough time to exit the building. The fire "tested" the materials and they were inferior.

Well, a "fire" *is* coming that will reveal your choice of materials. It's coming on the "Day," and by that Paul meant the day you stand before the Lord to be evaluated and rewarded.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

You can get by using common, more temporary materials as you serve the Lord. You can just barely show up, or arrive a few minutes late. You can throw your ministry together at the last minute. At work or at school you can concentrate only on your job or your study rather than seize upon opportunities for sharing.

Or you can do **everything** in your life as unto the Lord.

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1 Corinthians 3:14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.

I know a lot of folks aren't motivated by this idea of "rewards." I mean, after all, aren't we just going to throw our crowns at Jesus' feet anyway? Let me say three things:

1. If it is a matter of casting crowns, then don't you want to have a slew of them so you can participate?
2. I've come to see rewards more like the adornments we put on our robes to make ourselves as beautiful as possible for the Lord Who bought us and loves us.
3. In the context of the builder illustration, you want to build something that endures. Who wants the reputation of being a fly-by-night, shady subcontractor?

On top of that, *you don't want to smell like smoke in Heaven!*

1 Corinthians 3:15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul was quick to point out that this evaluation is *not* about your salvation. If you are at the Reward Seat of Jesus, you've been resurrected or raptured. You are saved and safe in Heaven. But you will see that you built on the earth with the more common, less costly materials.

You get saved. It's expected you will become a member of a local church that God has raised-up. Within that church, and that would include your mission out in the world, you are to serve the Lord. As you serve Him you are like a builder who is working on some part of the overall structure being built on the solid, timeless foundation.

**You can choose every day to use stubble, hay, wood, precious stones, silver, or gold. It's up to you.**

Look at it this way. You are a subcontractor on a building project. Your budget is your **own** time, treasure, and talent. How much of your own stuff

are you going to invest? If very little, then you are building with the more common, less costly materials. If a lot, *then you're going for the gold!*

Your individual choices will be revealed at the Reward Seat of Jesus. In the mean time the corporate choices of churches can sometimes be seen.

#2 As The Building We Should Evaluate  
The Ministry We Present  
(v16-23)

Paul had received a report about the church at Corinth. Visitors had told him about what was going on there. *It wasn't pretty!*

Like it or not, churches are subject to evaluation. We ought instead to evaluate ourselves.

In the closing verses Paul suggested three measures by which to evaluate the ministry we present corporately as a church. The first is to look for defilement.

1 Corinthians 3:16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

The “you” in verse sixteen is plural. Though the Holy Spirit indwells each believer individually, Paul had in mind that He also indwells, or is present among, the church corporately.

We are to recognize defilement in the Temple. The word “defile” means *to mar* or *to injure*. The word for “destroy” is from the same root word.

Again we find that commentators are all over the map on this. Let's think in terms of the building illustration. How would you mar or injure a building?

Well, one way would be through graffiti. One application in the Temple of the Lord would be to allow false teachings within it. They are like spiritual graffiti.

Another would be to allow immoral acts to take place within it.

You get the idea. The point Paul was making is that we realize and remember that we are the Temple of God on earth and must deal decisively with *anything* or *anyone* that would defile it. God certainly will and so should we. God will “destroy” that person which in this book seems to indicate that God will severely discipline him or her - maybe even end their life prematurely.

In verses eighteen through twenty we are told to evaluate our church for deception:

1 Corinthians 3:18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

1 Corinthians 3:19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "HE CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR OWN CRAFTINESS";

1 Corinthians 3:20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE THOUGHTS OF THE WISE, THAT THEY ARE FUTILE."

The “wisdom in this age” would be the current “wisdom of this world” in any era. In previous studies we’ve talked a lot about the difference between the wisdom of God in His Word versus the current wisdom of the world.

The measure here is that we not be self-deceived by the world’s self-proclaimed “wisdom” and bring it in to the church. Quoting first from Job then the Psalms, Paul established that God by definition is always the only true source for wisdom.

A church can be totally orthodox but follow a worldly model. By ‘worldly’ I don’t mean sinful. I mean natural. We can try to run the church using the methods the “wisdom,” of the world. It will be efficient in some ways but never effective or empowered.

Then Paul said to evaluate our church for boasting:

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1 Corinthians 3:21 Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours:  
1 Corinthians 3:22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours.  
1 Corinthians 3:23 And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

The Corinthians were dividing into factions that preferred one teacher over another. Paul thought it absurd since God had given *every* believer in Corinth *all* these teachers from which to learn.

“All things are yours” means God is working in and through everything on your behalf to mature you:

- The teachers of God’s Word He raises-up in your church are yours to instruct and correct and reprove you.
- “Life” is yours as God is working all things together for the good.
- “Death” is yours because He has conquered it and it is merely your transition home.
- “Things present” and “things to come” are yours in that you are able to make choices today based upon a real working knowledge of how the future will unfold.

“You are Christ’s...” Everything else aside, you were ransomed and redeemed by Jesus. You were set free from slavery to sin but you are to use your freedom to serve Him.

“Christ is God’s.” In Jesus Christ you have fellowship with God. You are restored to a relationship with God that exists now and for eternity.

In the context of these verses, where we are learning that the church on earth is the Temple of God, the application is this. **When someone is around the ‘church’ they ought to have the distinct understanding that Jesus is there! They ought to know that His Father is or can be their Father.**

We thus should evaluate, and constantly re-evaluate, the ministry we present to see that Jesus is it’s focus, to be sure He is present in it.

The evaluation begins with each of us individually being committed to building with excellence. If we are each going for the gold the Lord will be exalted. We should be building Gold Acres. If we are building 'Stubblefield,' then it's harder for folks to see Jesus.

The evaluation continues as we constantly inspect the 'building' for defilement or deception or boasting in men. In fact, anything we hear or see that is not Jesus needs to be dealt with.

We are the *only* place of spiritual health and healing on this earth. The church is where God meets with people.

- 🔊 Let's build it with the most precious, most costly things God has given us.
- 🔊 Let's maintain it so people see only Jesus.