

GOD'S POSSESSION

1 Corinthians 3:5–23

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1 Corinthians 3:5–23 (NIV)

“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his 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 man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’; and again, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.’ So then, no more boasting about men!

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All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

This past Tuesday night, I had a dream. I suppose the dream was kicked off by a rather involved staff meeting we had had that Tuesday afternoon. The upshot of the dream was that we were all weeping. I had resigned the church and the person who had been selected by the congregation to succeed me, I had discovered, had some motives and personality traits which were going to prove very injurious to the congregation. And there was, in effect, a wolf that was going to prey upon the sheep. I didn't know how exactly to handle the situation. I felt that so much of what we as a staff had labored together for and represented was now going to be severely tested. And changes of style, and emphasis upon the Lord, were going to be rearranged. Everybody was weeping. The thing that struck me in the dream was that they were weeping, not because no one had a job anymore, but because there was a tremendous concern for what would happen to the church if there were persons in the leadership position that had the wrong motivation.

I woke up from that dream startled. An immediate gratitude went up from my heart to the Lord for the people that are associated with me in ministry on the pastoral staff and on the church staff. The dream could be so clairvoyant in this sense, it really reflected the heart of those that are in a serving ministry in this body. Before God, I think I can say without exception that there has been a desire in our heart to serve you and to serve the Lord. And that there would be a tremendous grief that would come to us all if that style of ministry were to be changed and that emphasis were to be rearranged.

I pondered on this dream in light of the passage this week and it really struck me. It kind of gave me a personal sensitivity to what Paul was going through. Here was a church that he founded. Now self-centered people had arisen to prominence in the congregation and had created a spirit

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of partisanship, a real tug of war, a power control battle had broken out in the church. The great difficulty was that these individuals in the lead role were acting as though the church belonged to them rather than to God. They didn't understand that the church is God's possession, it's God's field, it's God's building, it's God's temple. Instead, it had become our church. For Paul's partisans, Paul's church. For Peter's partisans, Peter's church. For Apollos' partisans, Apollos' church. And some had set off into a fourth party and said, "We're Christ's church." It's not Paul's. It's not some little group that wants to make Christ their possession and say, "We've got Christ and you don't," sort of thing. But the church, in a sense, does belong to the Lord and to Him only.

I've noticed how subtly into our language there can work terms that shift the emphasis away from understanding that the church does belong to God. We use terms very casually and easily like, for example, "our church." I suppose that's ok if we mean "the church we're associated with." But if it's meant in the possessive sense, that the church is ours, then that's not right. I may be a little overly sensitive at points, but I cringe when a person on staff is introduced somewhere as "George Wood's assistant." Because they're not my assistant. They are the Lord's workers and co-laborers with me. I cringe when occasionally I hear that you go to "George Wood's church." Nothing could be further from the truth. I think any pastor in this area feels the same way. The church that God has called us to pastor is not ours, by any stretch of the imagination. Whenever I'm tempted to really start thinking that the church is my possession, the Spirit comes in and says, "Don't you ever start thinking that way. This is God's church. You must always remember that. And in reality, you are not the pastor of this church. There's only one chief shepherd—Jesus. And all you are is the pastor under Him. You are a sub-pastor."

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Paul is launching into this problem at Corinth, and he's saying, "What is Apollos? What is Paul? Only servants." "Servant"—that word means, in its first usage, essentially, "table waiter."

Nobody takes a waiter and puts the waiter on a pedestal and says how great the waiter is, and forms a clique or a club or a partisan group that rallies around a waiter. No, they're only servants. Here in this letter is a correction to the cultic personality of the body of Christ.

Paul turns again against the quality or cultic personality by emphasizing how much we are God's possession. He selects an illustration from rural life and says, "We are God's field" or "God's farm." He takes an illustration from city life and says, "We are God's building." And he takes an illustration from religious life and says, "We are God's temple." In each of these he reminds us of how much we belong to God.

I. First we are God's field (verses 5–9).

I delight in this word "field." It means "cultivated land." In the Greek, the word is spelled *georgiom*, which is very close to how I spell my name, the first five letters. It's a delight to know that my name is in Scripture. You'd have thought that "George" was a non-biblical name. Now you know that, indeed, it is rooted in Scripture. It means "field," or another derivative of the word is "farmer."

A. One thing Paul is saying in this passage about our being God's field is the fact that, without laborers, God's field is not cultivated. He doesn't say that explicitly, but implicitly, it's there.

Without laborers, God's field is not cultivated. It takes a Paul to plant and an Apollos to water.

The field would never come to life were it not for the fact that workers are in it. That's how the gospel got to Corinth. Not through an angel bringing the message, not through some mystical message arriving through the airwaves. But through real living human beings who came to Corinth and witnessed of Jesus Christ. It started in the vineyard, the farmland, the field.

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That's how the gospel got to Costa Mesa. Not through God sending a super ESP message, through the subconsciousness of some individual. But through persons who came and shared the good news of Jesus Christ with others. We're all in God's field, primarily through the instrumentality of someone sharing the gospel with us. Very few of us came to the Lord reading the Bible alone, without a witness. Most of us are here in the kingdom of God because of workers who have, in one way or another, shared Jesus Christ with us. What is true in agriculture, that you do not farm a field unless somebody works it, is true also of the gospel.

There must be workers.

In the Corinth situation, there had been workers. They first prayed "thy kingdom come" and then had worked. These laborers, Paul is reminding the Corinthians, have had a common goal and will therefore receive a reward for their labor. These ones that have divided up in the body of Christ their allegiance—Paul says that the true servant of God is not doing that at all. "We've worked together, we've had a common goal to see a harvest come to pass." Verse 8 so beautifully says, "The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose. Each will be rewarded according to his own labors." Not, "Each will be rewarded according to his own success." For the reward for the believer is not according to his success but according to his labor. There are a lot of Christians, both in lay capacity and in missionary and pastoral roles, who have done quiet, unsung, unremembered acts of kindness and of love. But have labored for Christ. Maybe someone does not have a great deal of visible results to show, but the labor has been there. On the other hand, someone may have great results to show but perhaps didn't do anything except wind up on the harvest field after a time when everybody else had worked so hard. The result, the reward, is for labor.

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Paul has learned, as an individual worker, as an individual person, not to complain that he wasn't Apollos but to accept who God had called him to be and to be that person in God's field that God had called him to be.

B. A second thing that is being said here, about ourselves being God's field, is that more than one person has been instrumental in our spiritual development, but it is only God that has caused the growth.

Paul says, "I planted, but Apollos watered." If you think in your own spiritual experience, you will discover that there are persons who had varying roles in bringing you to the place of spiritual development where you are today.

I owe so much to so many, many people. I think, too, in my life there have been persons who have had a significant place spiritually in my life, that today are not serving the Lord or at least not serving the Lord as I wished they would be. But that hasn't, nevertheless, destroyed the work which they have sown. I think of a minister under whose ministry I really came to know Jesus Christ in a deep sense, whose ministry I could not honestly recommend today. But his labor at that time in the gospel had been used of God to bring me to faith. What's the secret? The real growth is not a human agency. As much as we value the diversity of ministry that God places in the body. The real growth is because God causes the seed of the gospel which has been sown, even sometimes by unworthy hands, to grow.

We all take moments before the Lord when we give thanks to God for the people that have sown in our life. I doubt very seriously if I'd be a Christian today, were it not for my mother's prayers. She labored in a very quiet place. The ministry of prayer and love.

Yesterday afternoon, my sister and I, in my mother's small bedroom, shared together how much that room had been made a sanctuary by my mother. The fact that two to three hours of every

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morning was spent in prayer, as she kneeled by her bedside praying for her family, the world, people who are involved in the harvest. She has, through prayer, had a real ministry of planting.

We ought to, in the body of Christ, take moments where, in the history of a particular church, we look back and say, “We’re not the first ones on the scene. God has caused to happen what has happened. It has been through the faithful labor of persons who have gone before.”

The place we’re in as a body today is directly traceable back to people who laid a foundation, people who labored faithfully. At this time, this congregation is together, but God’s work will go on past us. We must remember that it is God’s work, not our work. Never is there any room for boasting or for pride in anyone. Because it is only what God has done. And it’s only as well that God allows us to follow people in the vineyard who have worked faithfully in His name.

If we are God’s field, then we reverence God’s work within us. We may be tempted at times to mock small beginnings or to be disappointed at the sickly little plant of grace that appears to be springing up in our lives. It seems so very small, and especially as a new Christian, we sometimes wonder, “How much am I really growing?”

But you are God’s field. And if the gospel of Jesus Christ has been sown in your life, what is going to grow is of God, and don’t despise the day of small things in your life. You are God’s field and you’re going to grow.

II. Paul says another thing about the church, about God’s people. He says, “You’re not only God’s field, but you’re God’s building.”

Here he takes an illustration from city life. He says, basically, three things about the building.

One is that it has a common foundation. Another thing is that it has a diversity of superstructure.

Third, he comes back to the theme that everything’s going to be tried by fire. A common foundation. The foundation is Jesus Christ. No other foundation can be laid than Christ. That

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means the faith of the body of Christ is built squarely upon Jesus. If the church, the body of Christ, is not built squarely upon Jesus, it's building another house. But the church isn't being built.

Some years ago, the Lord really convinced me that I should have fellowship as an individual Christian with all those that are building upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we only have fellowship with those whose superstructure we agree with. That is, what they're actually building on it. But the foundation is Jesus Christ. I found that I'm unable to spiritually fellowship with persons who do not have that foundation. I, for example, in recent years, have come more and more to realize why I am so at home with persons who are Catholic priests, Catholic nuns, than I am with liberal Protestants. My Catholic brothers and sisters have a foundation in Jesus Christ. Their faith is squarely rooted in the mission of Jesus Christ. Not every Catholic person is a Christian as well as not every person in this church may be a Christian, but their faith is based upon Jesus. Whereas, the Protestant liberal is not even sure that Jesus physically rose again from the dead. How can you build on that kind of a foundation? We lay a common foundation. What rises off that foundation is a matter that Paul gets to in a moment.

The foundation, though, has to be strong enough to bear the weight that's going to be put on it. Not too many of you are involved in contracting. I'm not. But I would not be so stupid as to put a big building on a foundation that was going to break up with the weight. Whatever foundation you put has to be strong enough to take the weight.

There's no other foundation that can take the weight of our sins, our burdens and our needs than the rock Christ Jesus. We are built literally upon the rock. That foundation is the first part of the building to be constructed. You make the foundation first. You don't make the roof first. Jesus

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Christ is laid into the foundation through His death and His resurrection. He is the first and the foundation that is the most enduring.

Paul glories in the foundation of Jesus Christ and he is giving here a warning to the church that they be careful. That there are some who may choose not to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. If that is the case, have no fellowship with them. But on the other hand, there are those who are building on the foundation of Jesus Christ who have a hodge-podge of workmanship. Some workmanship is good and some very, very bad. Some very solid, and some very fluffy. So he uses this comparison, that every man's work will be tried. That some indeed build on the foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, while others build using wood, hay, and straw. Some of you have visited the Greek world, the Roman world—have been to Athens or Ephesus. You notice, as you go among the Greek ruins, the beautiful marble columns that remain. Sometimes whole buildings are substantially intact in terms of their marble shell. The kind of precious stones Paul is referring to are most likely marble and granite, the building materials of his day. But in the actual time, when these cities were alive and teeming, there was more than the marble there. Maybe next to a beautiful marble building there might be a shanty composed of sticks and thatch. The great enemy of the early towns was fire. Fire would come sweeping through the town and destroy everything. When people went to pick up the pieces, the shanty would be gone, but the great marble would be there.

Paul's using this analogy to say that the church of Jesus Christ and His ministry is beginning to arise in the world. It's the first century. The church is beginning. He sees it coming off the foundation of Jesus. The walls are beginning to go up and he looks, and to his horror, the church is beginning to look like the world in terms of its construction. Because right next to something very beautiful, is something very, very shabby.

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So Paul sounds this warning to the church then, and to the church now, and to all Christians saying, “Watch how you build. You have a common foundation of Christ, but people use different materials to build on that.”

One writer has put it this way, “Paul sees the church rising with a strange mixture of design and material. The foundation, he knows, is the same, but on the solid marble is reared a crazy structure of secondhand and ill-adapted material. Here, a wall propped up with rotten planking, there, a hole stopped with straw. On one side, a richly decorated gateway of gold and silver, on the other side, a clay partition with loose boarding. He sees the teachers building rubbish, wood, hay, and straw, with great appearance of diligence, apparently unconscious of the incongruity of the material with the foundation they built upon.”

Paul, with his unfailing discernment, accepts it as a very possible fact that a Christian may do poor work. And that, just as it's possible to be biologically hung up on junk food, so it is possible spiritually to be hung up on spiritual junk food. What is rising in the kingdom of God and in the church may be of very, very inferior structure.

Paul says that we ought to take care that what we are building is of the more permanent material, as compared to the combustible material.

Then he says that everything's going to be judged by the day of fire. What he's essentially saying is that we know we're building solid if what we are building counts for eternity. Things that don't really count for eternity are misplaced emphases and misplaced priorities. And the day will reveal it. Everything is going to be tried by fire. Paul is speaking about the judgment of the Christian, the judgment of the born-again Christian. The born-again person that has passed from death into life. But yet God will reward each man according to his work, just as Jesus taught in the parable of the talents. Individual Christian labor is going to have some measure of reward in

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heaven. And how God's going to do this and how nobody's going to get jealous at the size of somebody else's reward, is going to be up to God. There will be no jealousy in heaven.

There's something about the prospect, as a believer, of standing before God empty-handed, as though all we ever did was receive and we never really contributed to His cause and to His work ourselves. That's what Paul is getting at here. The fire is going to reveal it. The judgment, the coming of Christ, will reveal the quality, the substance of our priority and of our labor and work as a believer. So we have to ask ourselves how well we're doing.

To us, as Christian laborers, if the test of judgment is put to your life, as to what is worthy and what's not worthy, what is going to survive? Every man's work will be tested by fire.

Paul says, "Not only are we God's building and have we got to be conscious of what we're building." In fact, he says, in regard to the building, that maybe it's possible, on the day of judgment, that we ourselves will escape, just like a person gets out of a burning house. They're ok but everything they've ever worked for goes up in smoke. What a sad situation of the Christian life, that perhaps all of our time and our effort and our resources absolutely amounted to nothing and all that results is that we ourselves are saved. That's bluntly what Paul is saying here.

III. The third thing he is saying is that we are God's possession in terms of being God's temple (verses 16–17).

The word for "temple" describes the niche in which the shrine of a God was placed. That's how the pagan's used it. Here the Spirit of God is placed in the shrine of our heart. The Spirit of God is placed into a living being.

If you want to look for the temple of God in the world, don't look for some cathedral somewhere. Don't try to find some church building. Don't even try to find this church building.

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Because that's not the temple of God; God does not dwell in temples made by hands. The temple of God is the people of God in the world. That is where God chooses to dwell: in you and in me.

We individually and collectively are God's temple.

In Corinthians, the idea of the temple of God is used, both in terms of the whole group of people being the temple of God, that is the church; and single persons, individuals like you and me.

Here in 1 Corinthians 3, the temple of God is really “You all are the temple of God. Whoever destroys the temple [this ‘you-allness’], him God will destroy.” In the Greek pronoun, there is the possibility of the word “you” being singular or plural, whereas in English, we don't have a distinction between the word in singular or plural. Here Paul is using the “you” like it means everyone. Like the southern folk—“you all.” You all are God's temple and whoever destroys this, God's building, this collection of temples, God will destroy. Here, Paul is making a subtle distinction between the person who builds inferiorly on the foundation, but nevertheless is building on the foundation; and the person who is not building at all, but wrecking. There are people in the body of Christ who are, in their haphazard way, maybe doing something for God. Paul says, “They'll be saved, but their work will be destroyed.” Then he admits the possibility that there are others in the church who aren't building at all, but they are rapidly destroying what has been built. “If you destroy what God has built,” he says, “then God will destroy you.” Which is a strong way of putting that, those who destroy what God is doing and attempt to invade the body with a spirit of self-love and self-interest and partisanship will be addressed by God Himself in judgment.

How is God's temple being destroyed? At Corinth, it was easy to know how it was happening.

Through the creation of divisions, the body of Christ was being brought down. Through erecting class distinctions, like distinctions between the rich and the poor and favorite treatment of one

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class as compared to another. It was being brought down through the open toleration of immorality in the body. It was being brought down by a spirit of “do your own thing, regardless of how it hurts or affects someone else in the body.” Very explicitly, those who destroy God’s temple, God will destroy.

A stern warning to those who see the body of Christ as a flock of sheep on which they can prey as a wolf. God will address that person and judge that person.

What I’ve said today is not on the positive or upbeat note. It’s more on the warning level. Sort of a downer. I’m conscious of this, because I like every message to be a positive instruction on how to go out and build your experience with God. I think, more and more, as I study the Scripture, I realize there is a subtlety. We are in a position of teaching the word. Presuming that everything from the Scripture had to be positive, it’s like the Scripture deals with us like parents deal with their children. There are times when I encourage my children, times when I build them up with incentive. There are other times when I may choose to use warnings or threats in order to keep some behavior from manifesting itself. Both hands belong to the same body and belong to the same mind and heart. One hand is the hand of encouragement. The other hand is the hand of correction. To be a fully formed person by the Scripture, if we only get the hand of encouragement and never the hand of warning, we will wind up soft in our Christian experience, not tough in the inner spirit, as God has designed for us to be. So the word of correction and warning go hand in hand with encouragement.

Let’s look at some encouraging things, as the chapter closes. In a summary way, Paul gathers up everything he’s been saying in the first three chapters. In one strong word, he returns to this theme of worldly wisdom. The Corinthians had prized themselves on their smartness, their ability to be oratorical teachers and have a real flair and have a partisan group collected around

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them or belong to such a group. He's saying, "You've got to reject this worldly wisdom. For God has His grip on the crafty and the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise are futile." If the person is simply judging life by what they see, hear, and think, then they are a non-spiritual person.

Because God has shown us things which we could never invent; that is, He has shown us Jesus Christ and His death and His resurrection. That is something which we could not have dreamed up. That is not the wisdom of this age. Christ is not the wisdom of this age. This age would have never thought Him up. But He is God's answer for us.

There will be those who will attempt, through their crafty dodging of the truth, to invent arguments against God. And ask God questions which appear to make God look bad and appear, at times, to make the body of Christ look bad. Have you ever witnessed to an unbeliever and their questions so stumped you it made not only you look bad but God look bad? Here the Scripture is saying that God will grab them. He'll grip the clever. He will grip the slippery. He will grip the cunning and the sly. That is, those who have always been able to get off the fence by some dazing, agnostic argument, are not going to get off the grip of God's personality. God has the slipperiest arguer in His grasp.

With that in mind, therefore, we reject the wisdom of the world, which says, "Do your own thing, you are the sum of your existence. There is nothing outside of you." We accept the existence of Jesus Christ.

Then Paul tells us, in the very closing words of the chapter, that we are to receive God's possessions as our own. We're to receive God's fellow workers. There are some who admitted to only having Paul. He says, "Don't just admit me. You're poor if you just admit me. Admit also the ministry of Apollos and Cephas, for they're all yours. Apollos, Paul, Cephas, everyone who

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labors and ministers among you. They're all yours. Don't divide up and say, "These belong to me but these don't."

He's also saying the world is ours. The meek shall inherit the earth. The world is ours now. Ours to lodge in, ours to study, ours to use, ours to enjoy, ours to conquer. The world really belongs to Christ's people, since He is the creator and whatever He holds title to, we own. We've got to use it wisely.

Life belongs to us. Life as a daily gift from God and life as an eternal gift from God. Life as a time of discipline as well as a time of enjoyment. Life as a representative symbol of the age which is coming. Life belongs to us.

Death also belongs to us. Somehow, I never thought of death belonging to me until I really got into this passage. Death belongs to me as well. We think of death as such an enemy, something to be feared, to shy away from. It is. It is all of these things. But because of Christ and His victory over death, death has become our possession. Death becomes the doorway through which we pass from this life on into the life which is about God. The doorway we pass from this world to the life to come. Death, therefore, becomes our possession. We own it. It doesn't own us. It has no hold on us. Death absolutely has no hold on us. It cannot damage us. It cannot destroy us. It cannot, in any way, alter our existence. Death simply becomes a passageway through which we come into our eternal relationship with God. We own death because of Christ. It's our possession.

Then Paul says, "Things present and things to come are ours." Notice he doesn't say, "Things past are ours." Because what's past is past and it can't be relived or undone. It has fallen into someone else's possession. But the present and the future are ours. The present—today, with its potential and its challenges. The future is ours as well, with all of its great things. Christians

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never have any occasion to look at the future and be frightened. The future is ours. If the stock market collapses, so what? If the common market is formed, so what? If earthquakes hit Southern California, so what? The future is ours. There's nothing to fear in respect to the future. What can there be to fear? The coming of the Lord? Not in the slightest! The Lord is coming for us. His coming is ours. Heaven is ours. The judgment seat of Christ? No, that's ours too. Because we are in Christ. Fear the future? Why? Eternal life is ours. Things present and things to come. All is yours.

If that isn't enough, "You are Christ's and Christ is God's." That great statement—you are Christ's and Christ is God's—is the title deed on God's property, which is us. The things which went before that are simply the inventory of the possessions. The possessions are the world, and apostles, and things present, and things to come and death. But the title is owned by Christ. He is our possessor. For you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

There's a glorious prospect that awaits us as children of God. Well might we repeat the words someone has said: "He who has God, has everything; he who has not God, has nothing."

Closing Prayer

Our gracious Father, we come to You today again with thanksgiving in our lives for Jesus. We are different, eternally different, because of Your Son, Jesus. We want to praise You today for the foundation that we stand on laid by You, a foundation that no man can lay. A foundation that says, "You are loved, your sins are forgiven, you have eternal life." We praise You for that foundation. Then, Lord, we look at how our lives are being lived for You and what is going up. Your Spirit is surely asking us questions in these moments, to cause us to review our heart. Things like, "What are your priorities? Where are your loyalties? How are you handling time? How are you handling resources? How are you relating to your responsibilities? Have you caught

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My heartbeat for your life? Are you following My footsteps? How are you building? What's going up? Junk? Wood? Hay? Straw? Cheap building stuff? Or are you taking into your experience that which is lasting? Are you practicing love, which does not ever fade away? Are you demonstrating, in countless and un-remembered acts of kindness and love, solid building for Me?" Lord, we hear You saying all these things and we want to come back to You with our heart and say, "Lord, You have freedom to approve anything we are doing. You have freedom to change anything we are doing, if there are changes that need to be made. If indeed on one side of our life there is a beautiful gate of gold and silver and on the other side there's a piece of junk for a wall with rotting cardboard, Lord, give us the courage and the power through the Spirit to do some refurbishing in our life." That what is built may be solid. We are Your people. We are Your temple. May this local congregation always reflect, to those that come within it and to the world, that here among us is a radiance and a dwelling of Jesus Christ. We praise You that all things indeed are ours, when we come to You. I pray especially, Lord, for someone here today who may not ever have come to You. That even while I pray now, their heart will be opened to receive You, that all things might be theirs through Christ our Lord. Amen.