## WHEN IT ALL GETS SORTED OUT 1 CORINTHIANS 3:4-15

I want to start this AM with a few *"light bulb"* jokes...

OK, "How many Southern Baptists does it takes to change a light bulb? Well, at last count it was 16 million, but they can't agree if the bulb needs changing.

Or, How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? They're not sure, but they've appointed a committee to study the issue.

Here's another, How many Mennonites does it take to change a light bulb? *Eventually about five, but if they had to, they could get along fine without a light bulb.* 

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is three. One to change the light bulb, one to bless it, and one to pour the sherry. How many Nazarenes does it take to change a light bulb? Eleven. One to change the bulb, and then ten to organize the pot-luck supper that follows.

Here's my favorite, How many Amish does it take to change a light bulb? *What's a light bulb?* 

How many Church of Christ does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but if anyone else tries to change the light bulb, the light won't come on.

How many Roman Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? *Nine. One to change the light bulb, and eight to sell raffle tickets on the old one.* 

We headed down the home stretch... How many Methodist does it take to change a light bulb? *Only one, but let's not offend anybody by the change.* How many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? *Three. One to change the light bulb, and two to bind the spirit of darkness while he does it.* And finally, how many Calvary Chapel folks does it take to change a light bulb? *Only one, but he's always late showing up for church...* Alright, now that I've offended everyone in the room, we can get started...

The point of the exercise is to show that every church group has it's own flavor and focus - and that's okay. I believe God has included into His family a wide array of churches, to reach a wide variety of people.

The world is a big place, full of diverse people, and God wants His Church to be a big tent. There should be room for many different stripes and types.

But there should be no room for discord, or jealousy, or needless fracturing. As Paul asked in verse 3, "For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?"

It grieves God's heart when a church, or fellowship of churches, or denomination claims to be the only group that pleases God. The Lord disdains such exclusivity.

Say you're the father of four kids, *like me* - and one of your children goes a little sideways. He or she picks up some bad habits - stains the family name. You'd be grieved. You would try to correct the wayward child.

But if you're like me you're not going to disown, or write off your own flesh and blood. And if one of your other children suggested that the prodigal was less your child than they are - you'd bristle up. *No way!* 

That sibling may be going through a tough patch, but he's still your kid. He or she still belongs to the family!

Yet this kind of acceptance was NOT what was happening in Corinth. Just the opposite was occurring. Believers in Jesus were pulling and splintering apart. On the surface they were dividing over personalities - rallying around a favorite teacher. *The real problem was envy and pride that had burrowed in their heart.* 

Their arrogance had erupted into a better-than-thou snobbery. Bothers and sisters in Christ were turning on each other, and it all literally turned God's stomach.

Paul says in verse 4 that this kind of behavior is a mark of carnality. "For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?" It sounded like what you'd hear on the elementary school playground, "Well, my dad is better than your dad?"

The spiritually juvenile Christians in Corinth had their own version, "My pastor is better than your pastor?"

You'd expect this kind of quarreling and dissension in the church nursery, but not the sanctuary. This carnality was evidence the Corinthians were babes in Christ.

Like kids they gloried in their heroes, and polarized around the two NT teachers, Paul and Apollos... Vern, I told you Paul and Apollos, not Paulie and Apollo.

It's interesting, that nowhere in the NT did either Paul or Apollos suggest such a division... It's true, the two men were different... *Paul was from Asia, Apollos was from Africa. Paul was trained in Jerusalem. Apollos was schooled in Alexandria, probably influenced by Philo's more philosophical approach to the Scriptures.* 

There's no doubt the two men were cut from different cloth. They were from different continents, and from different cultures - they may've been a different color.

I imagine Apollos a tad more scholarly than Paul - and Paul, a bit more straightforward than Apollos.

But nowhere does either man diminish the other. They had nothing but mutual respect and love for one another. And I'm sure it grieved them both that the Corinthians used their names, and their diverse ministries to justify their petty and haughty prejudices.

Actually, the problem had little to do with Paul and Apollos. The Corinthians were prideful. They were *competitive*, instead of *cooperative*. These men were just a convenient wedge to use to deepen the divide.

This is why Paul asks in verse 5, "Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?" Paul is saying to the Corinthian church, *"I hope you don't get a letter in the mail, and fall in love with the postman!"* 

It's *the message*, not *the messenger*, that should excite us. Jesus died to save us - not Paul or Apollos.

Paul had put the letter in the mailbox - but Jesus had written it, and stuffed the envelop, and assigned the address, and paid the postage. He even softened the hearts of the Corinthians to receive the message!

Christianity is all about Jesus!

And this is why I'm deliberately *nondenominational...* 

It is true, that I'm part of a family of churches called Calvary Chapel. And that name means something! It stands for a set of distinctive values that shape who we are and what we believe. But one of those distinctives is a humble approach to the rest of the body of Christ!

The last thing CC wants to do is to so accentuate our differences, that they eclipse our commonalities.

It should be enough for any church, or group of churches, to simply identify themselves as "Christian."

To emphasize any other tag, or label, or association only diminishes the importance of our connection to Christ. We're *CC*, but we don't go about making a big deal of it. First and foremost, we're *followers of Jesus*.

Paul goes on to say in verse 6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." This is a wonderful picture to which the Corinthians could relate. In Corinth, it was Paul who had planted the seed of God's Word in the hearts of the Corinthians. After Paul departed, Apollos came to pick up where Paul left off.

Yet in Ephesus, the roles reversed. Apollos planted the seed, and Paul came later to weed and water.

But here's the point, both planting and watering are simple procedures... In the first century, a planter rolled up his cloak, cradled the seed, and tossed it into the furrows... To water a crop, you took a shovel and dug trenches. Then you reshaped the trenches to move the water in the direction you desired. Again, both were simple tasks - anybody could perform them.

I love what commentator, John Phillips, says about verse 6, "Nothing could be simpler than sowing and watering. Anyone could do it. It took little or no skill...

Then came the hard part, the mysterious part, the impossible part. The dry seed germinated. There was life there. Tiny roots went down... Tiny shoots showed... A miracle had taken place... We call it "nature." It is God! God at work, giving the increase."

The mystery of life occurred!... God alone transforms a seed into a globe of edible, juicy, delicious fruit.

So who plays the key role? The planter? The waterer? Obviously, neither. The partner in the process that does the heavy lifting is God, the life-giver Himself.

And it's as true in *the spiritual realm* as it is in *agriculture*. What happens in the dirt, is what happens in the heart. We sow the seed of God's Word in a person's mind - sprinkle it with love - *but the miracle of new birth is in God's hands*. It's the Spirit who converts.

Remember when Jesus told Nicodemus. "You must be born again." The rabbi didn't understand. Jesus told him, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." It's the Holy Spirit Who has the miracle part.

We sow. We water. But the mystery of life - like the mysterious wind - our salvation - *"the increase" as Paul calls it -* is not in human hands. It's a spiritual work.

Once, an agricultural school in Iowa studied the ingredients needed to grow 100 bushels of corn on a single acre. Here's a partial list of what it required, "Four million pounds of water, 6800 pounds of oxygen, 5200 pounds of carbon, 160 pounds of nitrogen, 125 pounds of potassium, 75 pounds of sulphur, etc., etc."

The agronomists estimated that less than 5% of what is needed to produce a crop of corn is supplied by the farmer. And the same is true of the spiritual harvest...

We can *sow* the Word, but we can't it make *grow* in a person's heart. Nothing happens eternally or spiritually unless the Spirit of God is involved. It's "God who gives the increase" - and it's God who deserves the glory!

This was Paul's conclusion, "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." I love what Alexander Maclaren said about this squabble between the so-called Paul-ites and Apollos-ites... "So what was the use of fighting over which of two nothings was the greater?"

The messenger plays a role - amazingly, God uses us. But it's God who ultimately pulls the strings, not us.

I remember a man who prayed for and witnessed to his friend for years. He sowed and watered faithfully! And his prayer was finally answered. A stranger shared the Gospel with the man's friend, and he was saved!

But the man who'd prayed got mad... *he was upset he wasn't the one to lead his friend to Christ!* This was the kind of selfishness that flourished in Corinth. Rather than rejoice in the results, it was all about *"me."* 

Certainly, God uses us to touch people's lives at different points, but how and when and where we're employed is not our issue. It's up to God. Without exception, it's the Spirit of God Who works the miracle!

Verse 8 is amazing, "Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor." As Maclaren called them, *the planter* and *the waterer* are "two nothings." Their contribution is minuscule... who among us can't tell another person what Jesus has done for us... who can't love on someone that Jesus died to save...

Yet here's what's amazing, God chooses to reward us eternally for playing even *our nominal role.* 

Notice Paul says, the planter and the waterer *"are one."* They're on the same team. They share the same goal. They serve the same Boss... There's no need for them forming cliques or polarizing over lessor issues.

We work together, but we're rewarded individually.

Paul states, *"Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."* We receive our own reward, since we'll all be judged by different criteria. It's not like we're all salesmen with the same sales quota.

Some of us have been given more responsibility than others... some of us have greater gifts... some of us have been placed in more strategic places... This is why *similar results* don't equal *identical rewards.* The key for each one of us is to **be faithful** to our calling.

And this is why faithfulness to God in your life may look very different than it does in my life...

For one person faithfulness is *going overseas*. To another person it's *walking next door*... For some it's giving *all*. To another it's offering *a tenth*... For some it's *a grueling task*. To another it's *a refreshing break*...

This is why Paul explains to us, "Each one will receive his own reward." But the glorious truth is that we all will receive a reward for our Christian service!

It's strange but some folks recoil at this idea. They're *too spiritual* for such a lessor motivation. They say we should want to serve God because we love Him, not because we're baited with some self-serving reward.

And I agree, let's serve the Lord because we love Him. But let's not pretend to some hyper-spirituality that expects more out of us than the Lord requires.

God knows us, and He has promises us rewards.

It reminds me of the man who woke up one morning and went outside to retrieve his newspaper. When he opened the door he found a strange dog with his paper in its mouth. He was delighted with the unexpected delivery service, so he gave the dog a few treats.

The next morning when he opened the door, again there was the dog. But this time the man was horrified.

Surrounding the dog was a couple dozen papers. He spent all morning returning newspapers to neighbors.

Apparently, those treats were a tremendous motivation for that dog - as are God's treats for us!

CS Lewis suggested we don't put enough stock in the rewards God promises us. In his book, "The Weight Of Glory," he writes of our stunted ambition...

"If we consider... the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures... like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

If we only understood the meaning of the rewards God has promised us. We wouldn't make excuses, and give in to half-heartedness, and sit on the sidelines.

We would spend all our time, and expend every ounce of energy we had straining for the prize.

Revelation 4 fast forwards us to a time yet future, when you, and I, and all the saints are around God's throne. We're caught up in the worship - in His glory! There He is... *the Lamb who was slain for us!* We can see His scars. We're awash in His love and grace.

For the first time in our lives we're fully cognizant of what Jesus did for us. The gratitude is overwhelming. All I can think about is what can I give Him in return!

That's when I see out of the corner of my eye, 24 elders laying down their crowns at Jesus' feet. That's it!

I can give Him a crown. But those crowns were the rewards I could've received, but didn't... *Oh, I didn't have the time,* or *I didn't care,* or *I was just too tired.* 

Jesus gave so much to you - don't finally get to the place where you can give back to him, and have nothing to give. Your greatest regret will be to have no reward that you can turn around and return to Jesus.

Listen to the words of the old hymn, "Must I go and empty-handed, must I meet the Savior so? Not one soul with which to greet Him, must I empty-handed go?" The answer of course is *"no."* We don't have to meet Jesus empty-handed. We can do our part. We can sow and water, and God will give the increase!

Paul finishes verse 8, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building."

Even though we're the "two nothings" - all we do is sow and water - God still calls us His "fellow workers."

We're partners with God. We're stockholders in His Kingdom. One day we'll reign and rule with our King.

We're "God's fellow workers" in the harvest, but we're also "God's field." He not only works through us, but works in us simultaneously. We're His field. He's sowing seed in our lives that He intends to bear fruit.

That means, are we fallow ground or fertile ground?

Some of us are crusty and dusty - we're like dirt in a drought - God could break off a pick-head on your heart. Let's cultivate a heart that's moist and receptive!

We're "God's fellow workers," "God's field," but now Paul changes metaphors... He goes from agriculture to architecture. For you and I are also "God's building."

And he adds in verse 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."

Every architect knows the span, and strength, and height of a building depends on the density of its foundation. If you want to *build up* you first have to *dig deep*. The foundation is the most vital part of the structure. And the same is true in spiritual construction.

Paul planted a church in Corinth, and in doing so he was building a structure - a Temple - a house for God. And he'd paid special attention to its foundation.

When we poured the slap in the lower parking lot we knew that one day we'd erect a building on that spot, so we poured a foundation that would more than support any structure we might've wanted to build.

This is what Paul did. He calls himself *"a wise master builder."* The Greek term he uses is *"architekton"* - from which comes the English word, *"architect."* Paul was smart, he laid a solid foundation on which God could erect whatever size or type building He might chose.

At the time, the Church in Corinth probably consisted of several house churches. They came together *for One-derful Sundays* - but usually they met in homes.

Yet when Paul laid the foundation for this church he wasn't thinking of a simple house church, he laid a strong enough foundation on which God could build a growing church, an active church, a sending church...

He tells the Corinthians, "But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Here's the foundation on which every church should be built - *Jesus Christ.* Build a church on Jesus and there's no limitations to what God can and will do.

Lean on Jesus. Learn of Jesus. Worship Jesus. Follow Jesus. Serve Jesus. Lift up the name of Jesus.

Enjoy the grace of Jesus. Build a church on Jesus, and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

Yet let me warn you, not every church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Just saying so, doesn't make it so. Some churches build on personalities, or provocative sermon series, or on a polished worship style, or social activism, or on a family emphasis, or on charismatic phenomena, or on a political agenda...

Build on anything other than Jesus and you build on a shaky foundation. Christ alone is the solid rock!

A ministry that lasts keeps pointing folks to Jesus.

Now go back to the last sentence in verse 10. Paul pens, "But let each one take heed how he builds on it."

When it comes to Christian ministry our foundation is Jesus, but when you're building you don't stop with the foundation. The footings are simply the starting point.

Afterwards, there's flooring, walls, windows, doors, and gables, and a roof, and wiring, and plumbing, etc.

A structure rises from its foundation. The **founding work** begins to determine the **further work**... a church is planted, a soul is saved, a teenager is discipled, kids are taught, a missionary is sent, a ministry grows... But Paul cautions us, whatever we build for Christ's sake, *"let each one take heed how he builds on it..."* 

In Gwinnett County when you go to erect a building you can't just pour concrete and slap up a few walls.

You have to obtain a permit. *I don't think you can build a doghouse in Gwinnett County without a permit.* 

And getting that permit involves drawing up detailed plans that comply with local building codes. You have to get a master-builder - an architect, to approve them.

And God also has His building codes! In serving God there're guidelines that Jesus expects us to follow!

One of the first rules in serving Jesus is this, "The ends never justifies the means." It's not just want we do for God that matters, but it's how we do what we do.

Just because something is done in the name of Jesus, doesn't mean the Lord is necessarily pleased.

Sometimes our motive or method undermines our ministry. Serve God for your own glory. Bully, pressure, mistreat people in the process. Behave in ways Jesus

*would've never acted,* and you may say you're serving God, but you're actually doing more harm than good.

I grew up in a church, that had for a time, a domineering pastor, but people justified him, "Well, he's a little heavy-handed and he can abuse his authority, *but he leads lots of people to Christ.*" That's no excuse.

The ends doesn't justify the means! As Paul writes in verse 10, *"Let each one take heed how he builds."* 

Daniel Webster once put it, "My greatest thought is my accountability to God." May that be true of us all.

This was Paul's thought. He writes in verse 12 of the ultimate accountability, "Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 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."

Christian service is *trusted to us* - we're God's fellow-workers - but our service will be *tested by Jesus*.

Here Paul takes us into the future. And he describes a day that awaits everyone of us who are in Christ.

Realize, the Bible describes four types of judgment...

First, is **the judgment of sin.** On Calvary's cross Jesus *endured our punishment* and *paid our penalty.* 

Faith in Jesus now puts an end to our sin. For folks in Christ, the cross is sin's final judgment. The Christian is now forgiven, and his sins are forgotten.

Second, is **the judgment of societies.** Throughout history God acts to bring justice and to punish evil.

Sodom and Gomorrah - the Exodus from Egypt - the fall of Babylon - the crumbling of Rome - the defeat of the Nazis, the collapse of communism have all been acts of God. Throughout history the providence of God has intervened at times and in ways to bring judgment.

And this should concern America! We've condoned the killing of the unborn, and redefined God's terms for marriage! *Don't think we can escape God's judgment!* 

Joel 2 says the ultimate judgment of societies occurs in Jerusalem's Kidron Valley - *the Valley of Decision.* Matthew 25 describes how God will judge the nations.

The third judgment is **the judgment of sinners**.

Revelation 20 speaks of an ominous day - a day yet future - at the end of the age - when everyone who's ever lived will stand before God's Great White Throne and give an account of the deeds they did on earth.

As Christians breathe easy, this is the judgment we'll escape. Our sin was judged on the cross - *by what Jesus did.* But reject Jesus, and you'll be judged by *the deeds you've done.* This is judgment none of us want.

We've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

Thus, our choice is either fall on *God's mercy now,* or stand on our *own merits* then. And I choose mercy!

There is a judgment of sin, of societies, of sinners, but there's also **the judgment of service.** And this is a judgment the Christian won't escape. For as well as being a child of God we're also *"God's fellow-workers."* 

You have a role to play in what God is building in the world. The foundation is Jesus, but each of us adds to the construction. As Paul says here, *"Let each one take heed how he builds..."* Our work will be inspected.

Over the years I've participated in several building projects. You develop your plans, pull a permit, then you break ground. *But you're not done with the County.* After each phase of construction you call in for an inspection. The County wants to make sure the work is done right. And this is how God feels about *His* work.

Even now the Holy Spirit is checking in - supervising our work for God. He convicts us, and corrects us along the way. But there will be a final inspection!

In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul tells this Church, "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."

The word translated "judgment seat" is the Greek word "Bema." This was a word with which ever Corinthian was acquainted. In the city center of Corinth, at the main agora or marketplace, there was a raised platform - it had huge columns, an elaborate stage, intimidating thrones. It was called *the Bema*.

And it was from here that the local, and regional, and Roman officials exercised judgment in various cases.

In fact, Paul had been before this Bema.

In Acts 18 a group of Jewish antagonists in Corinth rise up against Paul. They haul him to the Bema, where he's inspected by the Roman governor, Gallio.

The Jews had accused Paul of treason against the empire - but Gallio, a smart man - saw that their beef was over religious issues, and had Paul released.

But Paul had stood before *the Bema*. He knew the fear and trepidation that comes when you're under inspection. When your outcome is being decided.

And he recognizes this will be the experience of all Christians. Everyone of us will stand before *the Bema of Christ,* and our eternal rewards will be decided.

While we were in Corinth we visited the Bema seat.

Today it's in ruins. It's an archaeological dig, but I tried to imagine myself in the agora that day with Paul, standing before the most powerful man in the region.

There's a pole in front of the Bema. The person under inspection stood by that pole. If any sort of punishment was due, he'd be tied to it and flogged. If a reward was to be bestowed, he'd stand by it in honor.

Every other year, in a locale not far away, the Greeks held an athletic competition similar to the Athen's Olympics. Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, and it was here at this post, before this Bema seat, that the laurel wreaths were awarded to the deserving athletes.

Now Paul foresees the day when you and I will stand before our Lord's Bema seat, and receive from Him the rewards of our service. And Paul says the quality of our work will be revealed *"by fire."* We're told in verse 13, *"the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is..."* 

Realize, when it comes to what we've done for Christ, it's not *the amount* that will be judged, or *the appearance* - the flash and splash. It's the heart behind our service that's judged. It's our motive that matters.

Jesus inspect our service to see "of what sort it is..." It's not our quantity, but our attitude that's sorted out.

In 2 Corinthians 5:10 when Paul says "that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." The word "bad" means "worthless or useless" in contrast to "evil."

What's under inspection at the Bema isn't salvation, but our service. When it comes to what we did for Christ, did we do it from the right motive, or were we inspired by pride or self-promotion? Was our service for Jesus *worthless or worthy - useful or useless?* 

Unbelievers will be judged by their works, whether good or evil. Christians are saved by faith, not works. But our acts of service *after we're saved* will be tested. God will reveal *"of what sort"* they were. He'll expose the true motive behind all

of our works of service. The day is coming for us when it'll all get sorted out!

The times you taught Sunday School grumbling because you had to get up early to babysit a bunch of snotty-nosed kids... the time you ushered, and hurried folks along so you could get home and watch football...

Paul says those acts of service will be like *"wood, hay, and straw"* in the fire. They look impressive going in, but the fire of God's holiness will burn them to ash. Whereas, the time you jumped out of bed eagerly to love the little ones with the love of Jesus... the time you led worship with a smile - made it peppy... the time you shared your faith because you cared - when those acts of service pass through God's holiness they'll come through un-singed... like *"gold, silver, precious stones."* 

There's a lot that looks impressive on Earth, that will be exposed in the end as worthless in God's eyes.

Whereas, some deeds that escape our attention right now, will be held up in heaven as precious to Jesus!

Paul says in verse 14, "If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

Paul realized the anxiety that accompanies any inspection, let alone this one. I got sweaty palms when we were waiting on the County to sign-off of on the pavilion. Imagine, the nervousness we'll sense at the Bema of Christ, when eternal rewards are on the line!

This is why Paul assures us this is *NOT about our salvation, but our service.* We're saved by the blood of Jesus. Everyone at the Bema Seat will be ushered into heaven, but not everyone will bring a reward with them. Some Christians will be saved, but "suffer loss."

They'll watch what the adoring crowd thought was being done for Jesus' sake, go up in smoke. In the end, all our pride and our self-centeredness - *even what masqueraded as service to Jesus* - will be incinerated! Heaven will not be defiled by any form of self-glory.

Realize eternal rewards are serious business! Again, you don't want to get to heaven, and be infinitely grateful to Jesus, and have nothing to give back to Him as a show of thanks... *that's the worst of regrets.* 

Don't be a sailor saved, but a ship sunk.

Bible teacher, Allen Redpath, once shared how he'd been a successful businessman, happy with his life.

But God called him to the ministry. He said six words kept ringing in his head, "A saved soul, a lost life... a saved soul, a lost life..."

He eventually concluded that's not what he wanted.

In addition to a saved soul, he wanted a life that counted. Redpath obeyed God's calling on his life.

*Will you do the same?* We're not just God's field and God's building, we're God's fellow workers, planting and watering - and building on the foundation of Jesus.

Be faithful to God's call, serve Him from a pure heart, and you'll enter into eternity with a bountiful reward!