

Back to the Basics



Topic

Dependence on God's wisdom

Theme

God expects believers to depend on God's wisdom for spiritual growth and faithful service.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will purpose to depend on God's wisdom for spiritual growth and ministry.

Materials

- Resources 1, 2, and 5
- Visuals 2 and 3
- Gold wedding ring
- Hay, leaf, or grass

Scripture Focus

1 Corinthians 3

Summary

Paul exposed team church's carnality. They failed to use God's wisdom to grow spiritually, which led to their emphasis on personalities instead of Christ. Paul explained servant ministry to them and then exalted God's wisdom as the only option for growing spiritually and ministering faithfully.

Outline

I. Paul Exposed Corinth's Carnal Ministry (3:1–4)

- A. Reasons for carnality (3:1, 2)
- B. Results of carnality (3:3, 4)

II. Paul Explained Servant Ministry (3:5–17)

- A. Build on the right Man (3:5–11)
- B. Build with the right materials (3:12–13)
- C. Build with the right motive (3:14–17)

III. Paul Exalted God's Wisdom (3:18–23)

- A. Man's wisdom is foolish (3:18–20)
- B. God's wisdom causes flourishing (3:21–23)

Memory Verse

*"For we are labourers together with God:
ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building"
(1 Corinthians 3:9).*

GETTING STARTED

Building with the Best

Many followers of false religions will use the absolute best materials and craftsmanship in building structures dedicated to their gods. Buddhists, for example, use lots of gold in their temples to Buddha. Obviously, their sacrifice and service to their gods is in the end worthless. Their building efforts will amount to nothing in eternity.

VISUAL: Display visual 2 to show an ornate pagan structure from Bangkok, Thailand. Display visual 3 to show a simple hut made of grass and mud.

ASK: How long would you expect each of these structures to last?

The Bible passage for today metaphorically compares the process of building a structure to a believer's service for God. Some believers *build* their *structure* with gold, silver, and precious stones, and others *build* with wood, hay, and stubble. Paul's point is that God wants our lives to count for something that will last for eternity.

We will learn how we can serve God in a way that *builds* with gold, silver, and precious stones instead of wood, hay, and stubble so that our lives will count for eternity to the glory of God.

With This Ring

Before class, twist a piece of hay, grass, or leaf into the shape of a wedding band. As class begins, have a few couples share their engagement stories.

ASK: Ladies, what did the gold ring communicate to you about your future husband's intentions?

ASK: Men, what sacrifices did you make to be able to afford a gold ring?

Display the wedding band made of hay.

ASK: Ladies, how would you feel if you had received this ring from your future husband?

Gold communicates dedication because it takes sacrifice to get it. Giving up a piece of hay to make a ring requires no sacrifice at all.

The lesson for today presents a metaphor that compares gold to hay. God desires the type of dedication and sacrifice that is worthy of gold.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Paul Exposed Corinth's Carnal Ministry (3:1–4)

A. Reasons for carnality (3:1, 2)

First Corinthians 2 ended with the truth that the believer has the *mind of Christ*

(2:16). The Holy Spirit gives the believer the ability to understand spiritual things so accurately that his understanding aligns with Christ's understanding of truth. As noted at the end of the previous lesson, that amazing truth should drive believers to study God's Word diligently. But not all believers take advantage of such an opportunity. The church at Corinth was filled with believers who had never learned to grow spiritually and serve God faithfully.

Paul told the Corinthian Christians he could not speak to them as *spiritual* people (3:1), or believers who had learned to live according to God's wisdom and under the control of the Spirit. Instead, they were *carnal* (3:1), a word meaning *of the flesh* (cf. Rom. 8:12, 13). They lived according to human wisdom and were thereby acting like lost Greeks.

READ: John 3:5, 6. **ASK:** What two categories of people are identified in these verses? (Q3) *Those who are in the flesh and those who are in the Spirit.*

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:1. **ASK:** What does Paul imply by comparing the Corinthians to babies? (Q4) *That they were believers who had never grown up spiritually.*

Although at least five years had passed since Paul first preached in Corinth, the Corinthian believers were still in their spiritual infancy. Paul had to feed them *milk*, meaning basic spiritual principles, because they could not digest *meat*, meaning spiritual truths for maturing believers (1 Cor. 3:2). A five-year stretch as a baby, physically or spiritually, is not normal.

ASK: How does a five-year-old's knowledge and behavior differ from a baby's knowledge and behavior? (Q5) *The baby is nearly helpless and depends on others to feed him. The five-year-old is rather independent and able to feed himself so he might grow physically.*

ASK: How should the knowledge and behavior of a Christian, five years old in the Lord, differ from the knowledge and behavior of a new convert? (Q6) *The Christian who is five years old in the Lord should possess understanding of some of the deeper truths of Scripture, show the ability to apply them, and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit as a result.*

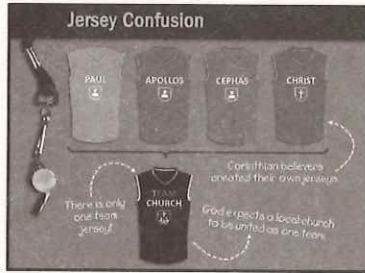
The Corinthians sinned against the knowledge that Paul had imparted to them during the year and a half he spent with them (cf. Acts 18:11). His personal ministry gave them a tremendous opportunity to mature spiritually. Yet many of them squandered the opportunity and thereby remained babes in Christ. They needed to submit to the Spirit in order to mature as believers.

B. Results of carnality (3:3, 4)

The Corinthian Christians' carnality was evident not only in their lack of spiritual knowledge and growth but also in their bickering. Paul indicted them for their carnality, charging: *There is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?* (3:3). As we saw earlier (1:11, 12), the Corinthians formed factions around personalities (3:4). Some screamed, *We follow Paul!* Others shouted, *Apollo is our man!*

Forming factions within the church was the result of the Corinthians' carnality. They were saved out of Greek culture, but they never stopped living like Greeks in that they exalted and followed human leaders. They perceived differences in Paul, Apollos, and others, aligned themselves according to those perceived differences, and then claimed superiority in the church because of their alignment. That is exactly what the Greeks did. They aligned themselves according to philosophers and then claimed intellectual superiority based on their chosen philosopher.

Members of one faction within team church became envious when another faction grew or seemed to have strong reason to claim superiority. In trying to change the balance of power, they caused trouble in the church. Church became a competition between teams rather than a place to grow stronger as one team.



RESOURCE: Display resource 2 to review that the believers in Corinth were essentially putting on different jerseys and playing against each other when they were actually all on the same team.

ASK: How likely would you be to join a church known for envy and strife? (Q7)

READ: Ephesians 4:1–3. **ASK:** What can believers do to safeguard church unity? (Q8) *They need to live according to the Spirit.*

Churches today still have problems with carnality. How carnality expresses itself in the church is different because we live in a different culture, but the solution for the carnal church is always the same. The church needs to submit to the Spirit and grow according to God's wisdom as found in God's Word.

II. Paul Explained Servant Ministry (3:5–17)

Paul continued by explaining what it means to serve God in a church. He clarified again his role and then pointed the church to Christ, the only Man on which they should build their ministry.

A. Build on the right Man (3:5–11)

Paul used two metaphors to communicate to the carnal Corinthians. He wanted to be abundantly clear so they might be able to digest his teaching and grow in their spiritual understanding and practice. Perhaps we could say that the metaphors represented different kinds of *strained fruits and vegetables* to help the Corinthians believers move from *baby food* to *solid food*.

Paul opened this section with a planting metaphor. The Corinthians were familiar with agriculture. They cultivated fields and grew grapes in the lands below their city.

Paul referred to himself and Apollos as workers in God's field. They were simply the human instruments God had used to prepare a spiritual harvest in Corinth. Paul had planted the gospel seed; Apollos had watered it; but God made it grow (3:5, 6). Paul's point is that neither he nor Apollos were good foundations for building a church ministry.

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:7. **ASK:** How do the workers in God's field compare to God? (Q9) *The workers are powerless to bring fruit from their labors. Only God can bring about growth and lasting results.*

Paul's line of reasoning also showed how silly it was for factions to follow either him or Apollos. The people in the factions claimed to be followers of common field laborers. Only fools would take pride in being the follower of a common laborer.

Paul and Apollos had worked as one in God's field. They were a team, and both would receive rewards for their faithful service (3:8). Paul assured the Corinthian believers that he and Apollos were coworkers with God, and the Corinthians were the field in which they labored for God (3:9a).

Switching to a construction metaphor in middle of verse 9, Paul compared the Corinthian church to a building. *Ye are God's building*, he wrote. The illustration is based on the idea that a building project demands teamwork. Architects, engineers, contractors, foremen, and crew members must cooperate, each contributing his skills where they will do the most good. Not one of them has the freedom to make major decisions or act independently. And all of them work for God, the building's owner.

God owns both the field and the building (3:9), meaning the Corinthians belonged to God. As the owner, God would make His field productive and His building tall and strong in accordance with the Corinthians' level of submission to the Spirit. The more they submitted to the Spirit, the more productive and stronger they would become.

Paul gave some focus to the building metaphor by drawing attention to the importance of a building's foundation (3:10), the part of a building that provides stability and strength. The stability of a church's ministry also depends upon its foundation. If it is built on the Rock, Christ Jesus, it will endure and enjoy God's blessing. If it is built on any other man, it will fail.

Paul told the Corinthians that he and other leaders were simply builders, but Jesus Christ was the church's foundation (3:10). Paul had laid the foundation by introducing Christ to the Corinthians (cf. Rom. 15:20), but Paul was not their foundation. Christ alone is the foundation upon which the believer can rest his salvation (3:11). And once confident that his life is set upon that foundation, a believer's potential for service and growth is virtually limitless. Paul counseled the Corinthians to utilize God's wisdom in building a glorious superstructure that will testify to the strength of Christ, their foundation.

ASK: What might be some evidence that a church is being built on Christ?

(Q10) Its members are active and united in purpose; its efforts are fruitful in that people are being saved and disciplined.

B. Build with the right materials (3:12–13)

Paul emphasized the importance of using the right quality of materials in God's building. A Christian can build with either *gold, silver, and precious stones* or with *wood, hay, and stubble* (3:12). The first class of materials is valuable; the second is inferior. The first endures; the second expires. Paul's point is that all building activity is not profitable activity. Quality counts in erecting God's building.

Paul is talking specifically about the Corinthian leaders and members (*God's building*, 3:9) building each other up (cf. Eph. 4:11–16). The gold, silver, and precious stones represent God's wisdom. The wood, hay, and stubble represent human wis-

dom. Work based on God's wisdom is done for God's glory and in His strength. The Corinthians had predominantly been using the latter set of materials. They ministered in their own strength and for personal glory. Paul made sure they understood the eternal consequences of building with such *flammable* products.

ASK: When have you regretted using inferior building materials? What were the consequences? (Q11)

God designed the Judgment Seat of Christ for church age believers. It will take place in Heaven following the Rapture.

Christ, the foundation of the church, will inspect each believer's part in His building project (1 Cor. 3:13). The Judgment Seat of Christ is the setting for such inspection (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). The penetrating gaze of Christ will test the quality of a believer's building materials. He will *burn up* any *flammable* materials, leaving only the part of the building that was constructed of gold, silver, or precious stone.

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:13. **ASK:** How accurate do you think Christ's judgment will be? (Q12) *Perfectly accurate. There will be no fooling Christ.*

C. Build with the right motive (3:14–17)

If a person's building materials pass inspection, then he will be eligible for reward (1 Cor. 3:14). If the materials burn up, then the believer will suffer loss of reward (3:15). This does not mean the believer will lose his salvation. Paul assured: *If any man's work shall be burned . . . he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire* (3:15). Salvation does not depend upon our record of service but on the Savior's redeeming grace. Our sins were covered at Calvary.

ASK: Is it possible to perform Christian service in a sinful way? Explain. (Q13) *Yes. A believer could do a good work but have sinful motives. A believer's motives are often hidden to everyone but God. God cannot be fooled.*

ASK: What are some wrong motives a believer might have for serving the Lord? (Q14) *A desire to be recognized; a desire for power; a desire for control; a desire to escape guilt.*

A small quantity of gold, silver, and precious stones carries more value than a large quantity of wood, hay, and stubble. A ton of hay sells for less than an ounce of gold. Stubble is completely worthless. Obviously, rewards are based on the value of our works instead of the vastness of our works. It is better to do a few things faithfully and well for the Lord's glory than to do many things for our own glory. Even little acts of service prompted by the Spirit will be rewarded, whereas big, showy deeds performed in the flesh will suffer loss (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1–5; Gal. 6:7–9).

READ: 1 Corinthians 9:25; 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20; 2 Timothy 4:7, 8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4. **ASK:** What rewards are mentioned in these verses? (Q15) *The incorruptible crown, the crown of rejoicing, the crown of righteousness, the crown of life, and the crown of glory. See also Rev. 2:10 on the crown of life.*

Let us not miss the impact of this profound illustration that Paul used. By

building on the glorious foundation of Jesus Christ, we may construct out of our lives a sparkling tower that will shine through the darkness of this world, emblazoned with the reflective glory of eternity. In eternity, that building will be translated into crowns we can use for all eternity as a means of glorifying God.

RESOURCE: Display resource 5 to review the importance of building with the right materials when serving God.

To emphasize the importance of building on Jesus Christ, Paul compared the structure to a temple dedicated to God (3:16). The Spirit indwelt the temple. The Spirit also dwells in the church and in each individual believer who makes up the church. The church is the focus of God's activity in this age. He indwells and works through the church.

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:17. **ASK:** What warning did Paul give to leaders who might try to direct the church to build on anyone but Jesus Christ? (Q16) *He said God would destroy such leaders. Their efforts will prove fruitless.*

III. Paul Exalted God's Wisdom (3:18–23)

A. Man's wisdom is futile (3:18–20)

Paul stated that people who depend on human wisdom for salvation and ministry think they are wise when they are actually deceived instead (3:18). Paul called on them to become *fools* so that they might become *wise*. He means that from the world's perspective they need to become what appears to be foolish in order to become truly wise. The Greeks considered trusting in Jesus for salvation and serving Him to be incredibly foolish decisions. But from God's perspective, those who make such decisions are wise.

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:19, 20. **ASK:** What does God think of those who appear wise from the world's perspective? (Q17) *God is threatened by neither their ways nor their thoughts.*

B. God's wisdom causes flourishing (3:21–23)

Paul called on the Corinthians to live counterculturally by not seeking a mere man as an object of their boasting (3:21). Paul, Apollos, and Cephas were all part of the same team. They served Corinth and the rest of the Body of Christ so Christ's church might be edified. But none of them could rightly serve as the foundation for a church ministry.

Paul instructed team church to view him, Apollos, and Cephas as gifts from God for their growth in the Lord. In fact, God uses all Creation and the full range of life circumstances to work all things for the good of His church and for His glory (3:22). God's wisdom provides the church with all it needs to flourish.

READ: 1 Corinthians 3:21, 22. **ASK:** Make a statement summarizing how important the church is to God. (Q18) *The church is so important to God that He uses all His resources so His church might flourish.*



God uses all His ministers and resources to further His people because they all belong to Christ, and Christ in turn belongs to the Father (3:23). Both Christ and the Father have a vested interest in each believer. That means they both have a vested interest in our church. They care about this ministry, so they provided us with God's wisdom that we might grow and flourish.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Build with Fireproof Materials

Paul's challenge to church leaders to be building according to God's wisdom is applicable to all believers. Each one of us is responsible to contribute to the church's ministry. Christ will judge each of us for our parts in His building project.

ASK: Imagine your work before Christ's testing gaze. Will you be disappointed or encouraged by what He determines is worthy of reward? (Q19)

ASK: What actions might you need to take to ensure you are building with fireproof building materials? (Q20) *Check your motives for serving God; endeavor to glorify God above all else; focus on edifying others.*

Rely on God's Wisdom

Underlying Paul's instructions to team church is the need to know and follow God's wisdom. That means we need to be familiar with the Bible, the source of God's wisdom for team church.

ASK: What sources of wisdom compete for your devotion? (Q21)

ASK: How might you devote yourself to God's wisdom found in His Word? (Q22)

Summary and Memory Verse

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Depend on God's wisdom for growth and ministry.

Encourage your learners to memorize 1 Corinthians 3:9. Give them an opportunity to quote the verse in class next week.

