

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS

Matthew 12:30b

In spiritual warfare, neutrality is impossible. Jesus says in Matthew 12:30, *He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters*. We studied this verse in our last lesson and we mentioned that the action of gathering is closely related to the building up of God's temple that Paul talks about in 1Corinthians 3. Today, we will continue to expound Matthew 12:30b from Paul's teaching. Here is what Paul says in 1Corinthians 3:9-17.

1Corinthians 3:9. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it.

11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

14 If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.

15 If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

This passage is often quoted out of its context and wrongly interpreted in terms of individualistic popular piety, that is, how a person builds his own Christian life on the Lord Jesus. Some people have used this passage to argue that even though you have no works, or that your works are so bad that they are only fit to be burned up, but so long as you have faith, you will be saved anyway.

Is this really what the apostle Paul is saying? I don't think so. I don't think that he is addressing the question of individual salvation. Neither is he exhorting the individual believer to build his life well on the foundation of Christ. This passage has to do with the church of God. Paul's singular concern is that those currently leading the church of Corinth take heed because their present work will not stand the fiery test to come. So the whole passage is about the church, not about the individual Christian.

A passage about the church

Let us look at some of the reasons for saying this. First of all, Paul says in v. 9, 'You are God's field; you are God's building.' The word 'you' is in the plural. 'You, together, are God's building, God's church.' The church is here compared to a cultivated field in which God causes things to grow. And when we look at the third chapter of 1 Corinthians as a whole, we notice that it deals mainly with the building of the church.

Speaking to the Corinthian church, Paul says, 'I preached the gospel to you and I established this church here in Corinth. I was the one who laid the foundation for this church. Then came Apollos, another servant of God. And this Apollos built on the foundation which I established.' Or, if you want to switch to the agricultural picture that he used, 'I planted; Apollos watered. I put the seed into the ground of this church and Apollos watered the field to help the seed to grow. This doesn't mean that I am better than Apollos. He who plants and he who waters are equal. We are one. We are all doing God's work, but it is only God who causes the growth.' So Paul is speaking about the building of the Corinthian church in the first place. He planted the seed; another person watered it. He laid the foundation; someone else is building on that foundation. And then of course, we can use these principles for the building of any other church.

Secondly, we find this word 'foundation' in v. 10. *As a wise master builder I (Paul) have laid the foundation.* When we compare this word with Ephesians 2:20, we see that the same word is used in connection with the church. Paul says in Ephesians 2:20 that the Christians at Ephesus have *been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.* Here again Paul is not talking about individual lives but about the building of the church. He is saying that Jesus is the foundation of the church and that the apostles and prophets constitute a secondary foundation which is closely associated with Christ. So it is all about the church.

Thirdly, notice the expression 'the temple of God' in v. 17. Again, this has to do with the church. Now, the 'temple of God' is in the singular. He is talking about one temple of God. He doesn't say, 'You are many temples of God.' Rather he says, *For the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.* The 'temple' is singular and the word 'you' is plural. 'You, together, constitute one temple of God.' In fact, the expression 'the temple of God' is often used in the NT to mean the church of Christ as a whole (Ephesians 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 3:12). Moreover, Paul states that the one who destroys the temple of God, i.e., who disrupts the unity of the church, will be severely punished. God will destroy him. He is not talking about a man destroying another man. He is speaking about a person who exerts his influence to destroy the church, the temple of God.

Building up God's church

Once we see that Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 3 is related to the church of God, and not to the individual Christian, it is easy to understand that the work in question is the work of building up God's church. Now here again you see the parallel with Matthew 12:30. When Jesus says, 'He who gathers with Me,' he is talking about the gathering of God's people, the church. 'He who scatters' has to do with the scattering of God's people, God's sheep, God's flock, or God's harvest. Whichever picture you like to use, it has to do with the church as well.

Paul is simply expounding Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:30 to talk about the work of building up God's church. 'Building up God's church.' This is an expression that Paul likes very much. The words 'to edify' and 'edification' are very typical of Paul. The verb form and the noun form occur together more than 20 times in the writings of Paul. And every time, they are used in the context of building up the church of Christ.

When we read the letters of Paul, it doesn't take too long to feel his love for the church and his intense desire to build the church. Paul writes in 1Corinthians 3:9 that 'we are God's building.' The Greek word for 'building' is the same as the word for 'edification'. It can either refer to the finished product or to the process. Here in v. 9, it refers to the church as the 'structure,' which is then described in v. 16 as the temple of God. In vv. 10-15, the emphasis is more on the process of building the building. Elsewhere in 1Corinthians, the verb and the noun forms are used for the concept of 'building up' or 'edifying' the church (1Corinthians 8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26). We find the same idea of spiritual advancement in many other letters of Paul (Romans 14:19; 15:2; 2Corinthians 10:8, 12:19; 13:10; Ephesians 4:12, 16, 29). So in all these places, we see Paul's great concern to build up, to edify the church.

God's workers

Once we have established this point, we need to identify the people who are working. Who are they who build God's church? Let's look at what Paul says. Back to 1Corinthians 3:9. Paul says, 'We are God's fellow workers. You are God's building.' We and you. The 'we' refers to Paul and to Apollos. It is also Cephas, the apostle Peter, who is mentioned in v. 22. The 'you' refers to God's building, to the church.

So Paul is saying, 'We built you up. You are the church. We are God's fellow workers who are building up the church.' Or, if you change the picture, 'You are God's field and some of us are sowing while others are watering.' Are God's fellow workers to be limited only to Paul, Peter, Apollos and people like that? It is true that this passage has particular relevance to the leaders and teachers of the church. But ultimately, all believers are responsible in one way or another for building the church of Christ. Every Christian should be actively building the church through his witness and service for the Lord. Paul tells us in v. 13 that every single believer will one day stand before the Lord Jesus and have his works tried and tested. No one will be exempted.

How many church members are really engaged in building up God's church today? Notice the Lord's words. 'He who gathers with Me.' It is not, 'He who gathers himself.' Some people seem very concerned about saving themselves but at the same time show little concern about saving others. They are willing to surrender their lives to God for their own salvation but not necessarily for others. The Lord's teaching is about loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourself. When we love our neighbor, we are concerned for his salvation. Yes, we need to save ourselves. But we must go on from there to save others, to gather with Christ, to bring in the harvest, to gather the sheep into the fold, to bring people into the kingdom.

Then comes this warning in 1Corinthians 3:10: *Let each one take heed how he builds on it, on the foundation.* The shift is now from the worker to the work. Every builder, i.e., whoever gathers with Christ, must be careful how he builds the church. Paul says that though the workers cannot lay a foundation other than Christ, they had better be careful how they build on Him. He mentions six different kinds of materials: gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. And the believer must choose very carefully which material he will use to build his part of the church because it will eventually be tested by fire.

Building materials

What was Paul referring to by listing these six building materials? Regarding this question, two observations should be made. (1) Work cannot be tested by fire. Work is a task, an activity, and activity cannot be tested by fire. The word 'work' in this passage does not refer to the activity but to the result of that activity. Gold is not a work. It is what you work with. It is the material with which you work to build something. (2) In the list given by Paul, three materials can endure fire (gold, silver and precious stones) while three others will be consumed by fire (wood, hay and straw). The contrast

is between the imperishable and the perishable qualities of the materials. Some materials are incorruptible and last forever. Others will deteriorate and decay.

In the light of the context, the gold, silver and precious stones represent for Paul the true Christian teaching and the life corresponding to it. On the other hand, the wood, the hay and the straw refer to the false teachings and to the works of the flesh.

This being said, I would like to suggest that the meaning of these materials is broader than that. What I mean is that Paul's metaphor not only refers to the teaching and to one's character, but it can also refer to people, to the souls and lives of men and women in the church. Let's expound on this idea a little more.

Building up the church with people

Let us examine these six materials one by one. We will begin at the end and work backward. The last material that is mentioned is the 'straw'. After the farmer harvests the grains of wheat, what remains on the ground are the stalks, the long stems of the wheat. This is what is meant by 'straw'.

Now the same Greek word for 'straw' is used in Matthew 11:7 where it is translated by the word 'reed' as a picture of weakness. Jesus said, '*What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?*' Something weak that the wind can shake in every direction? Jesus was speaking about John the Baptist. John was no reed. He was no straw either. Jesus will declare later that John the Baptist is the greatest man ever born of women. John is closer to gold and to silver.

We find the same word in Matthew 12:20. There it says, *A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory.* What is a bruised reed? This is the picture of a frail human being who is crushed by the weight of his sins. And the Lord Jesus is saying, 'I came to bring sinners to repentance, not to judge them. I came to save them, not to break them in the judgment right now.' 'The bruised reed, I will not break.' So the reed is the picture of man in sin.

Notice that we are talking about a person. The reed is a picture of a person, or of people. We can say the same thing about 'hay', the other kind of material that Paul mentions in 1Corinthians 3. The word 'hay' refers to people. Let us read 1Peter 1:24. We find the word 'grass' which, in Greek, is the same word as 'hay'. Hay is simply dried grass. What does Peter say? *All flesh is as grass (hay), and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.* Grass means flesh. All human beings are like grass because they are born of the flesh, and therefore they are perishable. So grass or hay is simply a picture of man in his natural state.

Let us take the next material, wood. Again, 'wood' is a picture of human beings in the Bible. Take for example Luke 23:31. *For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?* A green wood and a dry wood are used in the Bible, especially in the OT, to symbolize the righteous and the wicked, the green wood referring of course to a righteous man and the dry wood referring to a sinful person (Isaiah 23:15; Psalm 1:3; Ezekiel 17:24; 20:47). So the word 'wood' in the Bible, whether it is green or dry, is simply a picture of a person.

Paul talks about building the temple of God, the church. You don't build the temple with work. You build the temple with materials. For example, you can use straw, hay, or wood. And we saw that in each case, it refers to people. All these three kinds of materials refer to human beings in their natural state.

What about the gold and silver and precious stones? Well, we observe the same thing, i.e., they refer to people. And the remarkable thing is that when these words are used in the Bible, they refer to God's people, to godly people. Take the case of the precious stones. 1Peter 2:5 tells us, *You*

also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood. Peter is saying exactly the same thing that Paul says in 1Corinthians 3. You are like stones, living stones. You are precious because you have God's life in you. And as precious living stones, you are being built up into a temple of God, a spiritual house. You are the living stones which together constitute the church.

So here again we find that stone is a picture of people, more precisely of Christians. What about gold and silver? It is exactly the same thing. Gold and silver refer to people. Paul uses this expression in 2Timothy 2:20. *But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.* Here the Christians are described as gold and silver vessels. Vessels of gold and vessels of silver. Instruments of gold and instruments of silver. Building material of gold and building material of silver in a great house. And this great house is God's house. It is the church. Then Paul goes on to say, 'If you purify yourselves from what is ignoble, you will be a vessel for honor, a vessel of gold or of silver. But if you don't do that, you will be a vessel to dishonor, an impure vessel, morally unclean.'

Before the judgment seat of Christ

We see therefore that the materials listed in 1Corinthians 3 can refer to people. That is very easy to understand. The church consists of people. When we build the church of God, we build with people. We put people into the church. We are gathering His flock, to use the words of Jesus in Matthew 12. But the people in the church are not all of the same spiritual quality. Some are unregenerate people (the straw, the hay and the wood); others are regenerate people (the gold, the silver and the precious stones). And Paul gives us this warning: Be careful how you build God's temple. Make sure that when you build, you build with permanent materials. Don't use materials that will decay. Use materials that can stand the test of fire. Use gold, silver and precious stones. Because there will come a day when each person's work will be tested by fire and his reward thereby determined.

Paul says in 1Corinthians 3:13, *Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.* The word 'Day' is a well-known term for the day of judgment. And the word 'fire' is another well-known expression in the Bible which refers to the judgment. On the day of judgment, those who built the church with 'gold, silver, and precious stones' will see their work survive the test and they will receive their reward. However those who built with 'wood, hay or straw' will see their work consumed and they will suffer loss. Paul is quick to add that this loss does not refer to the loss of their salvation for 'they shall be saved' (v. 15). They will suffer loss of reward, whatever that will be.

Notice that it is the 'work' that is consumed (because it was built of perishable materials) and not the laborer himself. This whole passage is concerned about the kind of materials that you use to build the church and not about what kind of material you are. Now if these materials refer to people, you don't need to do too much thinking to conclude that when the wood, or the hay or the straw are being burned up, it is people who are burned up. Do you see what that means? There will be a terrible loss on the Day of judgment in which many who thought themselves as God's people are revealed to be otherwise. On that day, to these church goers who considered themselves to be Christians, God will say, 'I don't know who you are. Depart from Me.' These are the words of Matthew 7.

Summary

Let us sum up briefly what we have learned from this lesson. We first looked at the meaning of Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:30b. *He who doesn't gather with Me scatters.* This means that we either gather with Him or we scatter. Then we turned to 1Corinthians 3 and we saw that it has to do with the building of the church just as Matthew 12:30 has to do with the gathering of God's people. Three names are mentioned: Paul, Apollos and Peter. They are God's fellow workers. But we saw also

that in a sense, every one of us is engaged and must be engaged in building up God's church. That is why Paul speaks of 'each man's work' in v. 13. The work of every believer – not just those with teaching or leadership responsibilities – will be tried and tested by the Lord. When we build the church, we are building up people. And if we are building up people, we must make sure that they grow in grace. It is not enough just to make a decision for Christ. We must go on from there to edify one another. That is how the church becomes strong.

As Christians, we are called not just to believe in Christ, but to work with Him, to serve Him. *He who does not gather with Me scatters.* Those who do not share with Him in gathering people for the kingdom, in building up the church, are hindering God's work.