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Preparing for the Test – 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

- Have you ever had to take a test that caught you by surprise, or that you just didn't feel as prepared as you wished you were?...
- When I was in college, part of the application process for seminary was to take an exam called The GRE (the Graduate Records Exam)...it was like taking the SAT or ACT, except for people who desired to go to certain kinds of graduate schools...
- I didn't think much about it—I just found the location that was closest to where I was attending college, and then signed up to take it one Saturday...
- the week of the exam I was talking to a guy I worked with at the local grocery store—I had a part-time job there and he and I had become friends...he was student at Scranton University, we were about the same age, and he also was planning to go on for more education after college...
- we were just casually talking about our plans that weekend and I told him I was going to be taking this test; he mentioned that he too was going to be taking the GRE that weekend...and as we compared notes, we found out that we were going to be taking it at the same place on the same day...
- so then he said, well, what have you been doing to get ready?...
 - and I thought, well – I signed up to take it, and I'll find a couple of #2 lead pencils, and I'll probably brush my teeth and take a shower that morning...what do you mean, what am I doing to get ready...
- and he looked at me like I had just arrived from a different planet (I get that look a lot), and he said, I've been taking a class all semester of how to take that test...for the last 2 months every Saturday our class has been having simulated exams based on the ones they've given in the past...
 - we've learned the philosophy behind the questions, the equations you'll need to know for various calculations, different test-taking skills and approaches...
 - and I'm standing there thinking – I'm not sure my strategy of getting a couple of new pencils was quite as thorough as I'd envisioned...and it was one of those sinking feelings of realizing – I am in trouble and it is so late in the game that there's absolutely nothing I can do about it now...
- I was talking to my daughter Karis this week on the phone before she was going to take an evening exam in one of her engineering classes at Purdue – and I casually asked her, honey, do you feel like you're ready – she said, “dad—you're never ready to take an engineering exam...”...ouch...
- for some people, it's even worse...when our daughter Bethany was at Ball State, one of the things that amazed her was the number of students who seldom even went to class...it never dawned on her that someone would pay for classes (or perhaps, more likely someone's parents would pay for classes)...and then the student wouldn't even bother to go...
 - and one day after an exam she and some friends were heading over to get some lunch afterwards and a girl who was notorious for skipping that class walked by them and casually said – “what did you do in class today”, kind of laughing like – what chumps would ever actually go to class?...
 - and the group said – we had an exam...and the girl gave them one of the “oont-oohs”...
 - and then she realized they were serious – she wasn't just ill-prepared for the exam...she was so distracted with everything happening in her life that she even forgot the exam was taking place...

- now, you might say – PV, you’re right – that does bring back some bad memories...that’s why I’m so glad that period of my life is over...I don’t have to worry about exams anymore...
- friend, are you sure about that?...because if the Word of God is our guide, the Scripture would indicate that every person here has at least one more test to take...
 - and interestingly enough, it may not be the same test for everyone in this room...we’ll explain that in a few moments...
 - but the Person giving the test is God Himself...
 - and the Bible would also tell us that it is possible to be well-prepared...
 - with that in mind, please open your Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 3...page 131 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- our theme this year is **Taking the Next Step...with Joy**...
 - the book of 1 Corinthians is especially well- suited to that theme because Paul wanted the brothers and sisters in this church to do just that...to not be satisfied with where they were spiritually...but to take the next step...
 - the fact that we are having this particular message during the Winter Olympics is just perfect because Corinth also was a site of a major athletic competition...the Isthmian Games...2nd only to the Olympics themselves in prominence in the athletic world...
 - so just like you’ve probably been watching some of the events, or following the medal count...that would have been typical behavior for someone in the city of Corinth...
 - and as just another example of how the Lord goes out of His way to communicate truth in ways that men and women can understand, this book is laced with athletic imagery...and even if you don’t like sports – still you can have a better understanding of what it means to have a growing relationship with God because of these vivid word pictures He uses...
 - like last week, where we talked about eating at the big table...Paul said in verse 1 of chapter 3, **1 Corinthians 3:1 - And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.**
 - well, who wouldn’t get that metaphor – “you don’t take infants to Outback” ...at least not to eat off that menu...the Lord said it that way to get our attention about whether we are taking steps to greater maturity in Christ...
 - this morning we’re going to talk about...**Preparing for the Test**...let’s take a running start at this by beginning in verse 5...**read 1 Corinthians 3:5-15**...
- so we’re talking about Preparing for the Test, and with the time we have remaining, let’s think about **3 principles to help us be best prepared for the most important test we’ll ever take.**

I. Build on the Right Foundation.

- you may have noticed that Paul changed the metaphor in verse 9...
- he had been talking about infants...and about how the men and women in the Corinthian church needed to grow up spiritually, just like we expect babies to grow up physically...
- but then he brings in an agricultural theme in verse 6 -- **1 Corinthians 3:6 - I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.**
- see that’s what a good teacher does who really wants his listeners to grasp the concepts...he/she changes the metaphors because some concepts will resonate more naturally with some people than others...so we go from babies, to gardening...but watch how it changes again... **1 Corinthians 3:9 - For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.**
- so, you’re like a person who needs to grow, you’re a plant that is being cultivated...and you’re also like a construction project that will someday be tested...the Lord wants you to think about that...now please consider...

A. The importance of getting the foundation right.

- anybody in construction will tell you that having the foundation level, and square, and at the right depth is crucial for everything else that happens...
- you have to get the foundation right...
- we've had a lot of construction projects around here, and frequently one of the first things that is done is a soil analysis...where they bore down and check the kind of ground that we plan to build on...and then the foundation is actually adjusted based on the conditions...
- this auditorium was built the year before Kris and I came, but I'm told that when they were preparing the foundations to hold these wooden beams, the guy was in a hole over his head tying up all the steel reinforcing rods before the concrete was poured...we don't even think about that today – but you might notice those beams have never moved...
- when we were building the second half of our education building, they discovered some soils that weren't quite what they wanted, especially for a two story masonry building, so they designed the foundation to be sure it was strong enough...
 - and that particular architect was very detail oriented...and he wasn't in much of a hurry either---he wanted to be absolutely sure we got that right...and by God's grace, that's one of the reasons there aren't a lot of cracks in those walls even to this day...
- well, if that's true of a physical building that we all know at best is only going to last for a limited period of time, how much more important is the issue of a foundation when we're talking about the destiny of an eternal soul...that will live forever, somewhere...
 - yet some people are incredibly nonchalant about the nature of their spiritual foundation...their theological creed is dangerously close to, "whatever"...any old god will do...can I get back to whatever was amusing me at the time?...do I really have to think deeply and carefully about this?...
 - and the challenge is – you can't look at a person and automatically tell whether their spiritual foundation is wise or foolish...at least not yet...
 - that's why Jesus told the parable about 2 different people who built houses...and what was it that was different...the foundation...one built his house on the rock, the other on the sand...
- and for a period of time, you could not tell the difference...until when...until the rains came, the hard times, the challenges, the tests... **Matthew 7:24-27 - Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.**
 1. **One obvious question – On what foundation are you building your life?**
 - every person here would be very wise to slow down for a moment and carefully consider that question...and for some people, the honest answer might be...
 2. **My own ideas?...**my own ability to figure it out..."I think everybody has to find their own way"... **Proverbs 14:12 - There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.**
 3. **My own righteousness?...**for many men and women, that's it – my foundation is that I'm a pretty good person, I live a good life...

Titus 3:4-6 - But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

- if we could be saved on the basis of our own righteousness, then why did Jesus have to come, and why did He have to die?...and when you compare your life to God's perfect standard of holiness...are you sure that foundation is going to withstand the test?

4. The latest philosophy of man?...this one would have especially appealed to the Corinthians because they wanted no part of anything that made them feel or appeal foolish...which is why Paul told the Corinthians...

Colossians 2:8 - See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

- the overall point is – every person here would be very wise to think carefully about the foundation on which you're building your life...and what does this passage clearly tell us?

B. Jesus Christ is willing to be your foundation.

- 1 Corinthians 3:11 - For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

- Christ was the only man who ever walked this earth who never sinned...He was...

- Hebrews 4:15 - ...tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin.

- and then He died on the cross in our place, for our sin...and we know that the payment was sufficient because God raised Him from the dead...

- He is the Rock of our salvation...and you can build your life on that rock by admitting your sin and placing your faith and trust in Him...

- if you still have questions about that, why not sign up to take the Intro to Faith class (describe)...

- now I realize that many here would say – PV, by God's grace I've made that choice...and I've demonstrated that publically by baptism...I want the world to know that the very foundation of my life is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone...that's great...but then the next step of preparation for the test is...

II. Build the Right Kind of Building.

- because this passage makes it clear...someday the kind of structure you've built on this foundation will be judged...to determine "of what sort it is..."

- now I realize that might raise a dozen questions for you – I've tried to anticipate them and we'll get there in a minute...but think first of all about the context...

- what did this have to do with the people in the Corinthian church?...

- as we saw last week, Paul believed the average person in this body had genuinely trusted Christ...so the foundation was in place...

- the challenge was they were building in a very shoddy manner as if what they were constructing would never be tested...

- and he's trying to jar them out of their complacency...do you really believe all of this divisiveness is going to stand up to the judgment of God Himself?...do you really want this approach to life to be part of what's tested?

- and I realize you might say, what's up with God judging people?...well, don't ever confuse God being patient...with God being unrighteous...there will be a final reckoning...make no mistake about that...or else God would not be just...

- and there's more to this topic than we have time for this morning, but for sake of time, let's think about...

A. The two most prominent judgments in the New Testament.

1. Great White Throne judgment.

- you can read about that in places like Revelation 20:11-15...and it is a terrible picture of the unrestrained wrath of God upon those who refused to believe in His Son...
- and I realize you may not like that concept, but I would be less than a pastor if I did not clearly explain what God's Word says on this subject... **Revelation 20:11-15**
- Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of *them* according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.
- if the Bible is going to be our guide, the day will come when God's holiness will be put on full display...and understanding the horror of the punishment is what helps us appreciate the sufficiency of the provision...Jesus took that for us...
- and no person who has trusted Jesus Christ as savior and Lord will have to face the great white throne judgment...this is for those who have never believed...
- which is why our church puts so much effort into proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ here and around our world...because we want to do everything we can to prevent a person from ever standing before God without being clothed in the righteousness of Christ...
- and I would just say to every person here, if you don't know that you know...I would urge you to trust Christ while you have the opportunity to do so...

- now, this judgment is not what 1 Corinthians 3 is about at all...this passage is speaking about...

2. The Judgment Seat of Christ (or the Bema Seat Judgment).

- a couple of other passages that also speak about this...
- **2 Corinthians 5:10 - For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.**
 - the word "judgment seat" is the Greek word bemos – that's where the name "Bema seat judgment" comes from...
- **Romans 14:10 - But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.**
 - same word – bemos...
- every person in that culture would have immediately understood that picture...and we can too as we watch the Olympics...the bema seat is where the contestants appeared to receive their rewards, their crown, their prize...

3. We know that this event is different than the Great White Throne Judgment.

- a. Verse 15 - If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.
- b. Verse 12 - 1 Corinthians 3:12 - Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,
 - so there's no question about the integrity of the foundation, the issue is how you choose to build on it...
- c. Otherwise, we would have a situation where Christians still had to pay an eternal penalty for their sins.
 - Romans 8:1 - Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
 - Romans 8:31-39 – Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord
 - 1 Cor. 15:3 – Christ died for our sins
 - Cf. Galatians 1:4, 1 Peter 2:24, Col. 2:13, 1 John 2:12, John 10:28-30.

- so the issue at the judgment seat of Christ cannot be salvation...it's loss of rewards...and we don't say that in some self-centered way...or hyper-competitive fashion...

B. We want our lives to be productive for God...

- we want to be good stewards of what He has entrusted to us and use our time and our resources and our energies to advance His kingdom...
 - and we want to win...not for us, but for Him...Paul will later say in this book...
- 1 Corinthians 9:24 - Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only one* receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.
- Philippians 3:14 - I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

- if there's some kind of a test that we're going to face as followers of Christ, and there is the possibility of pleasing Him, and earning crowns that we can later cast at His feet...we don't want to be like I was a few days before taking the GRE – oh, there's a better way to be prepared than buying these pencils...or like the girl at Bethany's exam – oh, we had an exam today?...

- now, here's the \$100 question – what is it that's actually being judged?

C. The issue at the Judgment Seat of Christ is not “works that can be measured.”

- it's not – person #1 sang 100 solos in church – that's 2 crowns // person #2 sang 50 solos, that's one crown.
- the focus is not “amount”...how do we know that?...
- 1 Corinthians 3:13 - 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.

- are you picturing that...someday everything you've done (“each man's work”) will be gathered up by God and tested not with a tape measure, or on a scale...but by fire...why fire?...

D. At this judgment, the nature of your work will finally be revealed.

- on that day, one person will have this large amount of words, and thoughts, and actions...but when that pile is tested by fire, it will be like wood, hay, and stubble...poof, gone, no reward...

- but then there will someone else – maybe not nearly as flashy...not nearly as popular...you may not have even noticed them around the church-house...
- but on the day – their works will be assembled, and the fire will be applied...and it will be like gold, silver, and precious stones...great reward to presented to the Master...
- so what is it that's being tested?...

1. Motivation.

- why did that person do what they did?...
- we can't know one another's hearts...
- in fact, Paul is going to say in the next chapter – I can't even fully judge my own heart...but at the judgment seat of Christ...our motives will be revealed...and the reason you did what you did for God will become manifest...
- so you'll have one Sunday school teacher over here...whose work is tried...and because it was done for the right reason, will come out like gold---and receive great reward...
- you'll have another Sunday school teacher over there, who taught for the same number of years, the same number of lessons—but did it for selfish reasons, or with a bitter/legalistic spirit—that work will be tried, and it will go up like a puff of smoke...like wood, hay, stubble...but no reward...
- see, fire is involved because we're talking about issues that cannot be observed by the naked eye today...

2. Quality.

- now you might say – quality can easily be observed...
- not necessarily...here's why – you have no idea about a person's natural abilities...
 - what might appear to be high quality for one person was really just a half-hearted effort because God gave the person much greater natural skill and he/she was just barely putting any effort into it at all...
 - whereas the next person might be marginally gifted but the fact was they were giving it their very best out of their love for God...
- for example, if we played "grade the sermon"...let's say you gave me a grade for today...
- and then next week we have a guest speaker come in and he didn't know what I had spoken on the previous week – and he speaks on the same passage, and says the same thing, same outline, same illustrations, same tone of voice, everything...and we asked you to give him a grade...
- you'd say – well, in fairness, I'd have to give you both the same grade...
- that's true, in this life...but it won't be true in the next...
- because God knows what are actual abilities were...and I believe there will be some people who will have appeared to be serving God at a fairly high level, but after the fire is applied...it will demonstrate otherwise...
- while there will be some who seemed to just plod along, pretty average...but after the fire---it will be obvious that they were giving it their very best...

3. Service.

- now, I realize you might say – that's not right...
- I agree with you on motivation, and I see your point on quality...but service itself is a scale issue, it's a tape measure issue...
- we can see that today...
- no we can't...and here's why...the vast majority of what is done for God in the average church is done behind the scenes...
- and that kind of work will not be evident until the day it is judged by fire...
- and I am convinced that there will be some real surprises on that day...

- there will be some widows whose ministry it was to faithfully pray for their church, their pastors, their church family, their missionaries, their world...you hardly saw them...but their work will be manifest on that day...
 - [develop – people cleaning the bathrooms between breaks at the BCTC – no one was tweeting about that...]
 - you know, right now, if we had to line folks up on based on the way we believe they would be rewarded...we would do it one way...
 - but at the judgment seat of Christ...when all is revealed...I believe in many cases that lineup will be radically different...
 - and for some here today, that should be a source of great encouragement...for others, it should be a source of great concern...
- wouldn't it be terrible to find yourself in the middle of verse 15?... **1 Corinthians 3:15 - If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.**
- so what do we do with this information?...

III. Use These Principles to Prepare for the Test, and Stay Prepared.

A. Check your foundation

- be sure that you've come to Christ

B. Check your focus.

- the reason the girl at Ball State I mentioned at the beginning was caught off guard was because she wasn't particularly serious about her academics...
- the reason some of God's people will be caught off guard when this test comes is because they were not particularly serious about their growth...
- in fact, just use this week as an example – how frequently did you say – I don't want to do that, say that, go there – because it won't help me on the day of the test...

C. Check your service.

D. Check your quality.

E. Check your motivation.