Sagecreek Bible Church Al Albano

Hermeneutics (Bible Study Methods) Fall 2021

Interpreting 1 Corinthians 3:5-17

When approaching any passage of Scripture, the two most important rules to apply are accurate observation and surrounding context in our interpretation. Not only is the paragraph important to give a complete unit of thought, but the near context of other paragraphs, sections, and even a whole book is critical to arriving at a proper and correct interpretation of a passage.

This is not more apparent and important than in interpreting 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, and it becomes evident when we see misinterpretations of this passage. At the very least, verses 5-17 must be interpreted as a whole to accurately interpret verses 12-15. The common interpretation of these verses is, “This passage refers to the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10. The works discussed here have nothing to do with earning or losing salvation. The rewards (or loss of them) pertain only to Christians.”[[1]](#footnote-1) But a closer look at the context reveals something entirely different.

Here we see that the pronouns are very important. In verse 10 we see “another and “each one”, in verse 11 we see “anyone,” in verse 12 we see “anyone,” in verse 13 “each one” twice, in verse 14 “anyone,” in verse 105 “anyone,” and in verse 17 “anyone.” Who do these pronouns refer to? Do they consistently refer to the same types of people or different kinds of people? Is “anyone” universal, referring to absolutely anyone or is it limited to believers, or is “anyone” even more limited, referring to a limited kind or group of believers within Christianity? We can only know from the context. But more importantly, we can only know *for certain* from the context, and only by understanding the previous context (and even the following context) can we know for certain who he is speaking of specifically.

Paul says in verse 10 that he was “a wise master builder” who “laid the foundation” that others built upon. One popular understanding of this is that Paul planted the church at Corinth by the preaching of Christ and he gospel. The others here, according to one interpretation, are the believers at Corinth. The obvious application of these verses, then, is this refers to any believer in the church then or now. If this is the case, if a believer builds on the foundation of his or her salvation with gold, silver, precious stones, that believer will receive a reward from God when Christ returns, whereas those believers who build with wood, hay, or straw, will lose their reward when Christ returns but still maintain their salvation. But is this what the passage is actually teaching? A closer more careful look reveals a different interpretation.

In verses 5-9, Paul talks about his and Apollos’s ministries. He says in verse 5 that both of them contributed to the planting and growing of the church. In verses 6-7 he says that he planted the church and Apollos came in shortly after and watered what was planted. Both preached the word of God through their different but crucial ministries at Corinth; but it was God who gave the success of their efforts. But in verse 8 Paul says that both of their ministries were equally important (they are both one), and “each one will receive his own *reward* according to his own labor.” So in verses 5-9 Paul is speaking of the reward of ministers based on how they performed their God-given ministries. Then in verse 9 he says he and Apollos are God’s workers and that the Corinthians are God’s field, maintaining his agrarian analogy in the previous verses of God’s ministers being farmers who plant and water their fields. But to make his point, he has to leave his agrarian metaphor.

So when we get to verses 10-17 Paul uses construction terms, not agrarian terms. And in this analogy, God is the architect and Paul is the builder who laid the foundation. The foundation that Paul laid at Corinth was Christ. As he preached Christ some were saved, and a church was born. But when Paul left, other came in to teach the Corinthians, and according to both 1 and 2 Corinthians, some were good, some were not so good, and some were actually false teachers. So the “each one” and “anyone” terms in verses 10-15 are not individual Christians who are obedient or disobedient, faithful or unfaithful, but pastors and teachers who built on Paul’s foundation after he left. And what these pastors and teachers used as good construction materials—gold, silver, precious stones—are either their faithful or unfaithful ministries and accurate or worthless teaching of the word of God, which will be tested by fire at the coming of the Lord to yield or remove from them future rewards. So the “each one” and “anyone” of verses 12-15 are speaking of two distinct groups of saved pastors and teachers—some faithful and some not so faithful, some accurate and some not so accurate—who receive or lose rewards based on the value of their ministries.

But in verses 16-17 Paul switches to another “anyone,” another distinct group different from the first two. This is the false teacher. He obviously doesn’t use gold, silver, or precious stones to build in his ministry to receive a reward. He does not even use wood, hay, or stubble, losing his reward and still remaining saved. No, this “anyone” defiles the temple of God with his ministry. The word for “defile” is fqei,rw,, meaning “to corrupt or ruin or destroy.” If any pastor or teacher does this, God will destroy him—the same word. Why? Because “the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” And this might be an allusion to Leviticus 10 where God destroyed Nadab and Abihu by sending fire from heaven to consume them, because they ministered in an unworthy manner, against what God prescribed as holy.

For an even more contextual interpretation of verses 5-17 we need to consider the whole first section of 1 Corinthians which is chapters 1-4. In these chapters Paul is addressing divisions in the church. Many in the church were evaluating their teachers based on their ability to preach and teach with eloquence and worldly wisdom. Consequently, since Paul did not fit that type of ministry, the Corinthians were discounting his ministry as sub-standard. So in chapters 1-4 Paul defends his ministry over against the ministries of the misguided and unfaithful teachers as well as the false teachers who had come to Corinth captivating and mesmerizing the Corinthian believers.

So in this passage, Paul is teaching that ministers—pastors and teachers—need to serve in the best possible way as if using gold, silver, and precious stones to build with. Then when Christ returns, God will test their work. If it survives the fire as gold, silver, and precious stones do, they will receive a reward. If they build with wood, hay, or stubble—materials that burn up rapidly, God’s testing will reveal that their ministries were sub-par or worthless, even though they were saved, and they will lose their reward. But the false teachers who destroy the church, the minds of the people, the faith of the people, through their false, unholy teaching and their daily unholy example, God will destroy them in hell for eternity, because God’s temple, God’s church is holy.

1. *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985) 1765. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)