

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 22, 2021

### I CORINTHIANS 3: 9-17

#### “GOLD OR STRAW?”

If you step back and take a look at our parish, it is a very busy place! Lots going on---worship services, education, service to the poor, taking care of our new building, etc. All types of work for God. The grace and power to do the work comes from God. But who does the work? You do, for you are God’s people, God’s workers.

In our epistle lesson today, I Corinthians 3: 9-17, the Holy Apostle Paul uses a word picture to teach about our work for God. He uses the word picture of a construction project (you’re familiar with those!). Working for God is like building a building. And, as Christians, we are all laborers in this holy construction project of carrying out the work of the Kingdom of God in this world.

St. Paul says in verse 11 that the foundation of the building is the Lord---“For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” We, God’s workers, all build upon the foundation that is Christ.

There are different kinds of building materials to build with---some are great, some are okay, some are not okay! In verse 12, St. Paul lists them. The first category are the great materials: “gold, silver, and precious stones”. The second category is the okay materials---“wood”. The third category is made up of materials worthless for construction---“hay and straw”. Do you remember the three little pigs? Sounds similar, doesn’t it.....

What do we build with? What do I build with? What do you build with? Do we use gold or do we use straw?

How good is our work for God? St. Paul says we’ll get that question answered one day---on Judgment Day! He writes in verse 13----“each man’s work will become known, 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.” How that will all happen we sure don’t know! But we will find out! On that Day, our work will be tested and it will be shown whether we built for God with gold or with straw.

And then (I won't read these verses), St. Paul goes ahead in verses 14-15 to talk about how we will be rewarded on Judgment Day in accordance with how we built in God's great construction project.

Hopefully, you are doing some kind of work for God---part of the construction crew. There are many, many different ways to work for the Lord---both here in the parish, and outside the parish as well. The question today is not about what specific part of the construction project you are working on, but about what you use to work with----gold or straw? You will find out on Judgment Day, but it's better to examine ourselves now, so that if we are using straw we can repent and ask God to help us use gold instead.

*Two factors to examine in ourselves to help us tell if our work for God is straw or gold. Two signs of straw.....*

**First**----a sign of straw is if you are proud of your work for God and want others to notice it.

**Second**—a sign of straw is if you are touchy about your work for God. If either pride or touchiness are prevalent, then you've got some straw!

**Number one**----**pride**. When you do something good for God, for the church, for your neighbor, for the poor---do you congratulate yourself? Do you say to yourself---“Boy, I'm a good guy to have done that!” Perhaps you openly brag to others, or maybe subtly make sure others know what good work for God and the church you do.

Do you want public thanks and recognition? Do you eagerly await to see a list in the bulletin or elsewhere of those who helped or gave for some project in the church because you want everyone to see you on that list? And do you get upset if you accidentally get left off that “thank you list”?

These types of things are a sign of straw being involved in your service to the Lord.

Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America back during the Civil War, was famous for being really proud, having a giant ego. He thought he was the best at everything!

After he got elected, it was time for him to pick cabinet members for the new nation. Two of his aides had a private conversation about how this was going to be very hard for Davis to do because he thought that he himself was better than any one else at everything! One aide said, “How is he going to pick cabinet members when he doesn't think any possible candidate could do as good a job as he himself could?” The other aide replied, “I think I know what he will do. On the day he has to announce his picks, he will give a

speech and say, ‘I, President Jefferson Davis, make the following cabinet nominations---for Secretary of State: Jefferson Davis; for Secretary of War: Jefferson Davis; for Attorney General: Jefferson Davis; for Secretary of the Treasury: Jefferson Davis.’” Just a bit on the strawy side, don’t you think? (Year of Meteors, Douglas Egerton, Bloomsbury Press, 2010, p. 280)

Are you like old Jeff Davis? Do you tend to think that no one can do anything better than you can? That shows straw! That shows you work not so much for God’s glory as for your own glory. The 20<sup>th</sup> century St. Nikolai Velimirovich, said---“Whoever is doing his own work, and not God’s work, gladly brags about his work. Whoever performs a true work of God prefers to remain silent about it.” (in Grace For Grace, Johanna Manley, p. 133)

Do you have pride about what you do for God and His Church? Then your work is full of straw. If you are humble and quiet about it, that is a sign of gold.

**Number two---touchiness.** A second sign of straw is if we get touchy about what we do for the Lord and the church. Are we easily upset by any criticism of what we do? Does it bother us when someone figures out a better way to do it than we have been using? Do we resent it if someone else is in charge and “above” us in whatever ministry it is we do? Such touchiness means we have straw involved in our service.

If our work is truly for God’s glory, not our own, then we will be glad, not upset, if someone comes up with a better way than we did to do what we do. And we will be able to graciously accept criticism.

So we have looked at two signs of straw-----pride and touchiness. If we see these things in ourselves, then we need to repent, ask God’s forgiveness, and ask His help, so that we may work for Him in humility. So that we may serve for the glory of God, not for our own glory. Then, our work in the construction project will be golden.

If you see straw present in what you do for God, do not despair. You can change with God’s help.

An example of this is St. John of Damascus. He ended up a very holy man as well as a great Church Father and theologian and the author of many hymns we use in various worship services. But he wasn’t always so holy.....

He went from Damascus to St. Saba Monastery around 700 A.D. to become a monk. This important monastery is still going strong today---it is located in

the wilderness to the east of the Jordan River. The abbot, as he got to know John, could tell he was proud of his theological knowledge and of his song-writing talent. And so, for John's own good, to make him holier, he put a restriction on him. For the time being, no writing of either theological treatises or new hymns. John reluctantly promised to obey.

But as time went on, he began in his head to come up with beautiful poetry from which to write hymns. He believed the Church needed newer and better hymns for the funeral service----and he was sure he was the man to do the job! So after some time he went to the abbot and requested that the writing ban be lifted. The abbot thought it was too soon and John argued with him and perhaps was a bit less than perfectly respectful.

It was obvious to the abbot that John was still not free of the sin of pride. And so he refused to lift the writing ban and then he assigned John to a new job in the monastery----to scrub all the toilets. John obeyed and began his new work. We don't know how long this went on, but St. Barsanuphios of Optina, in his telling of the story, says it was for "no small amount of time".

It worked---doing that humble job gradually led to a change in Brother John. He went from being proud to being very humble. When the abbot saw how he had changed and had become humble and holy, he released him from his job of toilet cleaner and gave him the blessing to start writing both theological works and hymns. And then St. John went ahead to write many of our wonderful hymns—for Pascha, for our funerals, etc. And most important of all, John changed from a proud fellow, full of straw, into a humble and holy Saint, whose work for God was golden.

If you want to read his theological works, they are right in our church library. And as for his hymns---next time you are at a funeral, as you hear the beautiful hymns chanted, remember that many of them are by St. John of Damascus. And remember, it wasn't those wonderful hymns that changed him into a Saint---it was the toilets! (Elder Barsanuphios of Optina, Victor Afanasiev, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000, p. 732)

So when you see straw in your work on our construction project for the Lord, don't figure you are a hopeless case. Because you are not! God changed St. John's straw into gold. And He can change your straw into gold, too. And then on Judgment Day, when our work for God is made manifest as St. Paul wrote in today's epistle, your work for God will shine like gold!