

Master Builder

I have a frequently recurring nightmare. I wake up with my heart in my throat; temples throbbing. In the dream, I'm scheduled to preach for some occasion. The time comes, and I'm unprepared—usually, I can't find my manuscript.

The other night I dreamed I was to speak at a community gathering sponsored by the Ministerial Alliance—big church; big crowd. *I forgot.* Jo Lynn and I were out picking up stuff for yard work, and we drove by the church and saw the cars—and it hit me! I was wearing shorts and a sweaty T-shirt, flip-flops and a baseball cap; but I went in.

The program was half over, and as I walked down the aisle, the Master of Ceremonies said, "Oh, there he is!" I was introduced, and I stood up to speak—shorts, sweaty T-shirt, flip-flops, baseball cap... I looked out over the audience—several hundred people (it's always several hundred people in my dreams!)—didn't have the foggiest idea what I was going to say.

Mercifully, I awoke; and a verse of scripture was repeating in my head. It's in this passage:

(1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-13 NRSV) According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. ¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. ¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

A story has made the email circuit several times. It's about an elderly carpenter who was ready to retire. He told his employer of his plans. It was time to live a more leisurely life with his wife, and enjoy his grandchildren. He would miss the paycheck, but they could get by.

The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter said yes, but it soon was easy to see that his heart wasn't in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end his career.

Came the day when the house was finished. The contractor came to inspect the house, and he handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "my gift to you."

None of us wants to live in a house we know is inferior—because we built it.

But some of us live inferior lives—because we build them that way. We allow so many things to distract us as we build; cram too many *unimportant* things into life; we don't always put our best effort into activities and relationships that edify and build us up. Then one day we wake up and are shocked when we look at the situation we've created and recognize we're living in the house we built. And it's a wreck. And there's little joy inside.

In Pine Bluff, Arkansas on Cherry Street—about 13th or 14th—there's a beautiful old house Jo Lynn and I admired from the time we first moved there. One day we noticed somebody had begun to restore the house, so sometimes we'd drive out of our way just to see how the work was progressing.

Just outside Hannibal, Missouri is Garth Woodside Mansion, a restored antebellum mansion, where Jo Lynn and I have stayed a couple of times. It was Mark Twain's favorite place to stay when he returned to visit his boyhood home.

Run-down houses can be restored; and so can run-down lives and relationships.

The text today implies that each of us is building a house. The foundation already is supplied; and we know the foundation is the key to the rest of the structure. And yet, even with a solid foundation, it matters what materials you use to build. "*If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is...*" (Does anybody else think of the "Three Little Pigs" when you read this verse?)

So, the foundation is laid. Every day we nail on a board, or set a door, or paint a wall, or install a light. Here's a key question: who will live in the house?

Will the house be built for a large family? or for a retired couple? Will there be small children? It matters who's going to live in the house.

My father's parents lived on a farm out west of Ranger, Texas; and my last memories of my grandfather are associated with our visits to that drafty old farm house where the only plumbing was a hand pump over the kitchen sink. There were spaces between the window casings and the walls. You could actually see outside through those openings. And in the winter, they'd stuff newspapers in those openings; but it never quite worked.

In the dead of winter, the only heat came from a wood-burning cook stove in the kitchen (where it was always too warm), and a big rock fireplace in the parlor (where it was never quite warm enough).

I can still see my grandfather sitting in a big, wooden rocker in front of that fireplace, his lifeless legs draped with a quilt, a warm, hand-knitted shawl snuggled around his shoulders, his feet pushed into fur-lined, faded, brown slippers.

And I can see my grandmother sitting on a stool to one side of the fireplace—letting down the “bun” on the back of her head and brushing her long hair.

My sister and I loved to listen to the stories Granddaddy told: stories about how, when he was six, his family had come in a covered wagon from Louisiana to west Texas; stories about his days as a cowpuncher along the Cimarron Trail.

I recall seeing my grandfather sitting “tall in the saddle” riding out with the hired help in the late afternoon to bring up the cows to be milked. In these final memories, though, his body hardly functioned at all; he barely could feed himself; but when he told those stories, his face came alive: his dim eyes danced, and the words skipped across his tongue like a schoolgirl playing hop-scotch.

All too soon it would be time for bed. We’d put on flannel pajamas and back up the fireplace until we were almost ablaze, and then try to run and jump into bed before they cooled down. Grandmother would put a brick on the hearth after supper and let it heat; then she’d wrap it in a towel and put it under the covers at our feet. And there were so many quilts piled on the bed that our toes would get sore trying to hold them up; but it never worked. We were always cold.

It was a drafty old house—unpainted exterior, squeaking floors, peeling wallpaper, no indoor bathroom... But there was one redeeming quality about that old house: my grandmother and grandfather, whom I loved, lived inside.

The Master Builder has promised:

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?^[a] ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (JOHN 14:2-3 NRSV)

Think about the life you’re building—or maybe life is a restoration project right now. Each day you hammer a nail, place a board, raise a wall. Are you excited about the way it’s going?

The first consideration is this: who will be living in the spiritual house you build—or restore? Our text today concludes: ¹⁶*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*

In the Father’s house there’s a special room being built just for you. In the life you are building, is there room for him? PRAYER SLIDE—