

The Opinion that matters

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The reading today is from 1 Corinthians chapter 3, starting at verse 18. Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it's written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they're futile.

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future.

All are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you, or by any human court.

[1 : 08] In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. Emily, thanks very much for reading for us. Please do keep 1 Corinthians open at page 1148.

And why don't I pray for us before we begin. Let's pray together. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. Heavenly Father, we are very conscious that your wisdom is completely different from the wisdom of this age and the world in which we live.

We thank you, therefore, that you are speaking, God. And we pray this morning, please would you teach us, rebuke us, instruct us, and equip us to live lives which are honoring to you.

[2 : 16] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you read the story in the paper recently about the man from South Wales who was jailed for 20 years for dressing as a paramedic and disguising his car as an emergency vehicle.

He did so in order to run errands for his wife around the town of Neath and did so driving, apparently, at 73 miles an hour, complete with a blue flashing light on top of his car and fluorescent stickers down the side of his car, all of which, which you may be interested to know, can be bought online.

He pleaded guilty for dangerous driving and perverting the course of justice. Presumably, he was fairly easy to sport. But distinguishing the fake from the genuine is not always so straightforward.

And certainly when it comes to distinguishing an authentic church with genuine ministry from a worldly church with worldly ministry, it can be far from easy.

It's why Paul addresses the whole church in Corinth as he says, verse 18 of 1 Corinthians chapter 3, let no one deceive himself.

[3 : 31] Why is it that a church I used to belong to with a long tradition of gospel ministry, a flagship evangelical church in many ways for many decades, recently appointed a new vicar who has taken things off in a different direction?

How is that possible, we think? Well, because the church were deceived about what genuine, authentic Christian ministry looks like, just as the church in first century Corinth were deceived. And so what the Apostle Paul is trying to do here in these first four chapters of the letter is to show us what genuine Christian ministry looks like. And I hope we've seen a lot of that in the last few weeks, both here on Sunday mornings and also in our growth group.

It is hugely relevant to us, relevant for the youngest amongst us, relevant for the oldest amongst us, relevant for everyone in between. Relevant too for those who are here this morning who are looking

in to the Christian faith.

What does authentic, genuine, real Christian ministry look like? Well, two truths for this morning. Each one is gloriously liberating, and I've put them there on the outline.

[4 : 40] First of all, genuine Christian ministry looks foolish in this world. Genuine Christian ministry looks foolish in this world. Have a look at verses 18 and 19 again.

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. Now, in a sense, these verses are a recap of what we saw in chapters 1 and 2.

The church in Corinth was a worldly church, and they thought that in order to be taken seriously by Corinthian society, then they had to adopt its values.

And in first century Corinth, with all its Greek heritage of learning and culture, that meant looking wise. To look foolish in Corinth was tantamount to social suicide.

[5 : 43] Look back to chapter 1, verse 18. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

At the very heart of the Christian faith lies the foolish-looking message of Jesus Christ crucified in weakness and in shame. To proclaim in first century Corinth, just as to proclaim in 21st century London, that it's only by trusting that message, following that kind of saviour, that you can enjoy God's forgiveness and life with God, is to invite derision and scorn.

And yet what does God say? Verse 19. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. This is all part of God's radical reversal of values.

Human wisdom cannot bring knowledge of God. Verse 21. For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

In God's wisdom, it's through believing the foolish message of Jesus crucified that wonderfully we can stand before God guiltless on the final day.

[7 : 13] But it's not just that the Christian message looks unimpressive and foolish, because we've begun to see as well that the cross is not only the Christian message, but then also goes on to shape genuine Christian ministry.

It's what we saw in chapter 2. Chapter 2, verse 1. Paul says, Verse 3.

Verse 3. Or chapter 3, verse 5.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigns to each. And we'll see more next week.

You see, the cross doesn't simply stand at the heart of the Christian message. It then shapes genuine Christian ministry as well. The radical reverse of the values that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

[8 : 18] It's why I take it Paul quotes back in our passage in chapter 3, verse 19 and 20, these two quotations from the Old Testament. For as it is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness.

And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise that they are futile. The first quote there from the book of Job, where God says, he'll bring low those who are thought of in this world as being wise and lofty and impressive.

And he'll raise up those who are thought of as being lowly. The second quote from Psalm 94, this world's wisdom is simply futile and empty.

Everything this world thinks of as being wise and impressive, God looks at it and sees truly it is futile and it is empty. In other words, you cannot be a Christian and be wise in this world's terms.

To believe in Jesus Christ crucified, to line up with a ministry that is shaped by Jesus crucified, it is truly wise, but actually the world around us will think it looks foolish and stupid and will think we look foolish and stupid when we do that.

[9 : 37] Now, unlike the lady I was reading about recently who lives in Boston, America, who has just been given permission to wear one of these on her head for her driving license photograph.

Now, that is just foolish, isn't it? Plainly foolish. I'm going to take it off in case someone decides to take a photograph. We don't go out of our way to look foolish, but genuine Christianity is inevitably foolish because it is so countercultural.

The world we live in loves power and prestige, but you see, how does God display himself powerfully? Well, on a cross in wretched weakness. The world we live in longs for strong leaders,

but God's leaders, leaders of churches, must above all be servants.

The world shows off, doesn't it? It's heroes and it's gurus, but actually the Christian remembers that God chooses weak and lowly people and despised people so that no one can stand before God on the final judgment day boasting in themselves.

The world loves style and form more than content, spin more than substance, but those who follow Jesus cherish truth above all of those things.

[11 : 01] You see, part of what it means to follow Jesus is to side with his values rather than to side with the world's values. It will inevitably mean that we look foolish in the eyes of the world.

Well, Paul then applies that principle to the Corinthians boasting in their Christian leaders. Verse 21, So let no one boast in men.

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

Apollos, Paul, Cephas, all are yours, says Paul, because they are all engaged in the work of the gospel, in the work of proclaiming Christ to Corinth.

Indeed, all things, whether the world or life or death, the present or future, they're all yours, says Paul, because Jesus Christ has conquered all of them. You see, in Christ, we have so much more, bountifully more, than this world can offer.

[12 : 09] That's why Christianity is such good news. So why take on the thinking, the values of this world, and think you have to look good and impressive in the sight of this world when the gospel, when Jesus offers so much more?

So you see, here is the wonderfully liberating truth that genuine Christian ministry looks foolish. Not everyone will think you're a fool, but many will. Now, I think we find this very difficult, and perhaps especially this group of people in this room, we find it very difficult, because so many of us, an extraordinarily high percentage of us, in fact, have university degrees.

We're used to thinking of ourselves as being clever people. We're used to thinking of other people and looking at us and thinking we are clever and wise people. We're not used to looking foolish.

Perhaps many of us, I guess most of us, don't like to be thought of as foolish. And so you see, verse 18, we have a choice. Let him become a fool that he may become wise.

Will you sacrifice your pride and be willing to be thought of as a fool in order to faithfully proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified?

[13 : 29] Or will you just hide the gospel or only tell half the gospel or perhaps not even that? Because actually, what you really value is looking wise in the context of your friends and colleagues and so on.

Now, some of us will already have made that choice to look foolish. I hope this talk is an encouragement to you. Others won't. So here are some suggestions.

If you're at school and there's a Christian meeting or with a jam Christmas dinner coming up, are you willing to look foolish to invite friends along to hear the message of Jesus?

Or all of us with carol services coming up, are we willing for our church leaders to make us feel foolish? Let me explain that. Do you ever get anxious about inviting friends or neighbors to say a carol service or a guest event?

Anxious because you worry about what is going to be said. Do you ever get anxious like that? Well, I guess behind that, we're fearful, aren't we?

[14 : 43] Perhaps we're fearful that after the talk, actually, that friend or neighbor will turn to us and say, I never thought you believed that. Do you really believe that? And we'll feel foolish.

See, do you only ever speak part of the gospel going so far and no further because you fear what others will think of you? I take it, this is very liberating, isn't it?

It's so easy to get discouraged in evangelism, to think, well, if only I had the right answers. If only I could be a quicker thinking on my feet. If only I was naturally a bolder, less fearful kind of person.

Then it'd be so much easier. But it's not about having all the answers or being bolder. It is about having the right convictions that genuine Christian ministry will always look fearful in this world.

There is no escaping that. Even for the greatest, most powerful evangelists, it is about having the right convictions. Genuine Christian ministry looks foolish in this world.

[15 : 50] or perhaps, as I said earlier, here this morning, and you are weighing up whether to follow Jesus. Perhaps you've begun to realize that if you were to follow Jesus, you've begun to realize what others would think of you.

That there will be some friends, colleagues, family, who will think you are a fool for doing so. Well, understand that that is simply genuine Christianity.

Yes, there will be those who will think you are foolish for following Jesus. Secondly, genuine Christian ministry looks to the verdict of the next world.

Chapter 4, verses 1 to 5. This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. Now, I guess there's something in all of us, isn't there, which wants our Christian leaders to be impressive people with big personalities, winsome charm, great learning, and natural eloquence.

[16:57] The kind of people who look impressive, the kind of people who we can introduce our friends to, and they'll be impressed. After all, perhaps we think to ourselves, at least if they don't like the message, then they might be won over by their personality or by their abilities.

Now, some of those gifts may be useful. Some, of course, may be a hindrance. But notice here in verses 1 to 5 that what God is after in Christian leaders is not flashiness, but faithfulness, trustworthiness.

Someone, verse 1, who is a steward of the mysteries of God. Do you remember chapter 2, verses 10 to 13? Just turn back a page.

How God's Holy Spirit revealed God's mystery, the gospel, to the apostles. apostles, so that what the apostles wrote and taught when they then came to write and oversee the New Testament, what they were writing was what God wanted them to write, that the New Testament is God's words, God speaking.

Which means, you see, the gospel of Jesus crucified is held in trust. It is to be passed on. It's not to be accommodated, to fit the culture. Hence, chapter 4, verse 3, but with me, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.

[18:15] In fact, I do not even judge myself. What matters is not what the church in Corinth thinks of Paul. What matters is not what Corinthian society thinks of Paul. What matters is not even, verse 4, what Paul thinks of himself, his own verdict of his ministry, but, verse 5, the Lord's.

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. In fact, this is the third time in two chapters that Paul has spoken of that future final judgment day.

It's why it's been our theme this morning as we've been singing already this morning. Look back to chapter 3, verse 8. Each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Chapter 3, verse 14. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. And now, chapter 4, verse 5. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

[19:25] You see, Paul consciously operates and thinks in the context of the future in the context of eternity. He's not dominated by today and what people around think of him today, but by the future and the Lord's verdict on that final day.

I guess a number of those in JAM are facing GCSEs and A-levels next summer. And I imagine there are lots of conversations going on at school about how you think you're going to be doing and all that kind of stuff.

Perhaps someone says to you, you know, you're fantastic at maths, you'll be absolutely fine. And you're thinking to yourself, no, I'm really not good at maths, I'm pretty rubbish at maths, and I don't think I'm going to be fine. But actually, what you really know in the back of your mind is the verdict that matters is not what your friends think, it's not what you think, it's what the examiner says in the summer.

Well, in the same way, you see, here is the liberating truth, genuine Christian ministry, looks to the verdict of the next world. It's liberating for church ministers, it's liberating for Christian leaders, because you see, it delivers us from being people pleasers.

It's all too easy to be driven by the desire for approval, to feel pressure, to change the message, either pressure from expectations within the church or outside the church.

[20:58] But no, it's the verdict of the Lord Jesus on the final day that counts. So that's something you could pray for me and others. Do pray for courage and looking to that final verdict.

It's actually one of the good things, by the way, about the Church of England. So you may know that many independent churches are in a sense run as democracies, that big decisions are voted on,

the church can fire its minister.

Now, I'm very grateful the Church of England doesn't work like that. Yes, there are procedures if there's a genuine grievance, but actually, it's a good thing to have a church leader who hopefully, he listens and takes advice, but actually, who doesn't have to win the approval of the congregation and church family.

And that is a very good thing. Not to mention, of course, the approval of society. There was an article in the Guardian this week about the Church of England in the light of all the fuss about whether or not the Lord's Prayer should be projected as an advert in cinemas.

And the article, I thought, captured brilliantly the kind of church that our secular society wants. Let me read part of it to you. In a culture that is increasingly polarized and awash with labels and identity politics, the C of E is a beacon of murkiness and is all the more beautiful for it.

[22 : 23] While it rightly draws criticism for its failings, much of the good it does is routinely overlooked from lunch clubs for the lonely to projects with homeless people and drug addicts.

And no, the vast majority of its countless volunteers do not do it to convert anyone. It operates in every community like an NHS for the soul, free at the point of service.

It's a good thing and we should all care about it. Now that is the kind of church that the opinion shapers in our culture want.

A beacon of murkiness which is vague in its beliefs, which acts as a branch of the social services and doesn't try to convert anyone. That's the mould that our society wants the church to fit.

It's the way to get approval. Very sadly, this flyer came through our letterbox on Thursday just as I was working on this talk.

[23 : 27] It's a carol service which is being put on by St. Christopher's Hospice and it's being hosted by St. Barnabas Church in Dulwich Village. It describes itself as a multi-faith carol service.

I'm struggling to think what carols they're going to sing if it's a multi-faith carol service. But you see, it fits brilliantly with our culture of inclusiveness. Let's have a multi-faith carol service.

What's more, it's going to look impressive. We're told there are going to be celebrity readers and the choirs, two choirs from smart Dulwich schools.

Now, we're not in the business at Grace Church of pointing the finger unnecessarily. But that is very Corinthian, isn't it? Very Corinthian. You see, taking the values of the world, inclusiveness, impressiveness, looking to the verdict of the world.

whereas genuine Christian ministry looks to the verdicts of the next world. I take it it's liberating for all of us because it means that actually you cannot ultimately value and assess gospel ministry serving Jesus in the here and now.

[24 : 48] Much gospel ministry looks unimpressive in the here and now. Just think those of you who teach Sunday school and are helping in Sunday school and crash. use up part of your valuable free time perhaps on a Saturday or a midweek evening to try and work out what the Bible is saying to then think okay this is what the Bible is saying I've now got to communicate it to these six year olds or these eight year olds whatever it is.

You then go off to your classroom on Sunday morning and the kids sit down and do you know what they look just the same as they did three weeks ago and you think to yourself does it just go in one ear and out the other ear?

And yes it may be a wonderful thing when five years later perhaps that child stands up and they want to reaffirm their baptism promises or something like that. But ultimately it's only on the final judgment day that you will see the true value and the true benefits of that ministry.

Or again think about evangelism. Evangelism can be so discouraging. We can get all hot and bothered can't we about what people are going to think. The effects on our friendships when all along the real issue actually is are we being faithful to the gospel.

It's the verdict of Jesus on the final day that counts. Now for anything like me you find this rather difficult because you want to see instant results in the here and now. So you see one of the things I enjoy doing is washing up which may seem a very odd thing to enjoy doing.

[26 : 17] But actually the reason I enjoy it is because I can do the washing up, I can admire the instant results and actually it is so unlike what ministry is like the rest of the time.

When you can't see instant results, I'm not going to do anyone else's washing up just in case you're thinking it would be, you might invite me around for lunch or something. But I enjoy doing our own washing up at home simply because ministry is not like that you see.

The results are not immediate. When it begs the question what do you long for? What do we long for as a church?

The well done good and faithful servant from the lips of the Lord Jesus on the final day or the approval of those around us in the here and now? In the world of social media, the instant response of like or dislike, it counts for a lot, doesn't it?

Our online profiles are designed to make us look good in the eyes of others. As a society, what other people think of us is becoming more and more important.

[27 : 27] In an area such as Dulwich, many of us are success driven and correspondingly failure shy. And so here's the question. Are we willing to look foolish for the sake of Jesus?

in the end of the people who are who are who are we really concerned with and concerned for? The approval of those around us such that we don't really want to explain the gospel or only explain part of the gospel either individually or as a church or the approval of the Lord Jesus on the final day. Genuine Christian ministry looks foolish in this world. Genuine Christian ministry looks to the verdicts of the next world. Why don't I pray?

And then we'll have a couple of minutes for reflection to digest things and then time for a couple of questions if people would like to ask a question. Let's pray together.

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

[28 : 48] Heavenly Father, we confess how much we want the approval of those around us. How we want to be well thought of as being wise and intelligent.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus who lowered himself even to the point of death. And so we pray that you would enable us and grant us the willingness to follow a crucified savior both in terms of the message we proclaim and the gospel we proclaim and the way in which we go about it. Being willing to look foolish and unimpressive for his sake. And we ask it in his name. Amen.