

# 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5 AM

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, there's a lot that happens in the first letters of Corinthians.

So, I keep asking myself, what's the big picture? I think the big picture could be said this way. 1 Corinthians begins with a confrontation, and it ends with a victory.

Chapter 1, focus on the cross. The wisdom of God comes into confrontation with the wisdom of the world. Chapter 15, focus on the resurrection.

The victory of God, the final victory of God over sin and death, starts with a confrontation, ends with a victory. And everything in between, it raises all these key issues about human life.

What about our divisions and our quarrels? How do we get along? What about our bodies and sexuality? What about our minds and use of knowledge? What about our spiritual gifts and how we're relating to one another and using that in the ministry of the church?

[ 1 : 0 4 ] All these issues that come up come in the wake of the wisdom of the cross, and they come in anticipation of the hope of the resurrection. So, it's all about how do we live in light of Jesus' death and resurrection?

How does that shape the way we live? And in chapters 1 to 4, Paul has been addressing this culture of fighting and biting that has infected the church in Corinth and is threatening to destroy it.

So, last week, the final verses in chapter 3, verse 16 and 17, Paul says, Do you not know that you, plural, are God's temple, and that God's spirit dwells in you?

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him, for God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. So, Paul, in the first four chapters, is trying to get at what is threatening to destroy the church.

There are threats that come from the outside, but Paul is addressing threats that are coming from the inside. Divisions and quarrels and factionism and jealousy and strife.

[ 2 : 1 2 ] But as Paul does that, he peels back layer upon layer of what is going on in their hearts and minds that is leading to those realities. And I think that's what he's doing in our passage today.

The question for us is, what is underneath all the fighting and biting? In our world, in our own lives, in the church. When you peel back the layers, I think Paul says there are two attitude issues.

In chapter 3, verses 18 to 23, there's an attitude of pride. In chapter 4, verses 1 to 5, there's an attitude of prejudice. It's pride and prejudice.

And yes, I am married to somebody who likes Jane Austen. And as we watch everything that goes on in the Middle East and a whole bunch of other places in the world, as we see people's lives ravaged and torn apart by war, many of us come here with heavy hearts.

Because we are watching in the most kind of extreme form the carnage and devastation that is caused by long-standing pride and prejudice if it goes unchecked in our hearts and in cultures for long enough.

[ 3 : 22 ] And Paul, in chapter 3, is addressing the pride of the Corinthians in their human wisdom and leaders. And then in chapter 4, he's talking about how that pride fuels their prejudice towards Paul and his ministry.

And this is really important to Paul. He's not just like, my ego is personally hurt because some of you may not like me. Paul believes, as he says to us in chapter 15, that he has been entrusted by the Lord Jesus Christ himself to pass on something, not something that he created, but the gospel that was given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ.

That it is his job to pass that on to the church and to ensure that the church is built on the one foundation of Jesus Christ. So if people are starting to question him, if they're starting to critique his ministry, then Paul says, this is not an issue just because my ego is a little bit hurt.

This is an issue because it is a matter of the health of the church that it needs to rest on the one foundation of Jesus Christ. So for Paul, he is raising this question for us, how does the wisdom of God address our pride and our prejudice?

So we jump in in verse 18 of chapter 3. Let no one deceive himself. Pride is a form of self-deception.

[ 4 : 43 ] It's a way of thinking about ourselves. He continues on. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become truly wise.

For, verse 19, the wisdom of this world is folly to God. So notice what Paul is doing here. He's picking up on this contrast between wisdom and foolishness that he already raised in chapter 1.

Only this time, he's reversing the way that he talks about it. So in chapter 1, the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. In chapter 2, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God.

I mean, chapter 3, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. And let me remind you that wisdom in the ancient world tried to answer two questions. What am I here for, and how does life work?

So wisdom was about the why of life and the how of life, a purpose question and a practical question. So what is the problem that Paul is addressing? I think he's addressing our propensity for self-deception that comes, sometimes, from thinking that we know how the world works, and from thinking that we are savvy in navigating it.

[ 6 : 00 ] It's a common problem for professionals in a major metropolis, as Corinth was. So why is this such a problem? Because it often can lead us to defining ourselves in terms of the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of the cross.

Where do I get this? Did you notice that little phrase in verse 18? If anyone among you thinks that he is wise, these three words, in this age.

In those little words, there's a whole vision of human history and identity. In the Jewish mindset, history and our lives can be divided into two ages, this age and the age to come.

All of history understood as this age and the age to come. This age is dominated by sin and death and suffering and sickness. It's human life under human rule and human wisdom.

And the age to come is the new creation that the Messiah is finally going to bring to the world when he restores shalom under his rule and reign. It is human life under God's reign and God's wisdom.

[ 7 : 04 ] And in the New Testament, Paul says in Jesus Christ, the age to come has come crashing into the present age. The future reality of redemption and new creation has catapulted into the present through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So when somebody becomes a Christian, they are quite literally transferred from this age to the age to come. They are people now of the future. But they are living that new identity, that future identity in this world, in this age of sin and death.

So we see this tension throughout Paul, this tension of the overlap of ages. There's a tension between who we are in Christ, belonging to the age to come, and still living in this fallen world, this age right now.

So Paul is talking to people who are Christians. They love Jesus and they want to follow Jesus. They go to church and they love sermons and they rally around their favorite pastor, but they are still defining themselves in terms of the wisdom they have gained in this world, in this age.

The way this works in our lives, I think, is often a little more subtle than we realize. It sounds simple, but it's subtle, because it tends to hide behind a lot of our noble causes.

[ 8 : 28 ] So I can discover an important social agenda to get behind, and it may be a perfectly good social agenda to get behind, but I can start to define myself in terms of having an enlightened social awareness and social advocacy.

I can stumble upon an effective way to make a lot of money. And making money is not necessarily bad, but I can start to define myself in terms of my capacity to do this, my business acumen and my capacity for wealth accumulation.

I can learn how to lead and influence people quite effectively, and that's not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, but I can start to define myself in terms of the following that I amass on social media or elsewhere, and the power that I have over people.

And there's often a key next step in these things, is that when we find that we have hard-earned wisdom in the world, we often want to make that a defining feature of the church, too.

So the way that we think about ourselves and the church can actually be distorted by our successes and the wisdom of the world, not just our fears and failures.

[ 9 : 43 ] And so Paul, I think, is saying to the Corinthians, if you are a Christian, your identity has changed. And if you are still defining yourself by the wisdom that you have gained in this world, then you are deceiving yourself.

Because before the wisdom of God, it amounts to nothing. It's like dust on the scales or vapor in the wind or smoke in mirrors. And so he says that there is this spiritual process of humbling that needs to take place in your life.

And he says, if any of you thinks that he is wise in this age, verse 18, let him become a fool. Let him become a fool that he may become wise.

I think Paul's talking about this humbling that has to happen in our lives as we come to the wisdom of God in the cross of Christ. And Paul attaches to this a second exhortation.

He says, not only do not be deceived, but in verse 21, let no one boast in men, in people, in human beings. What's the connection between self-deception and boasting?

[ 10 : 50 ] The Corinthians boast in the sort of teachers and preachers who embody and exemplify the ideals of the worldly wisdom that they cherish.

So why do they boast in them? Because they want to identify themselves with this leader who embodies everything they value and they desire. And so boasting becomes a form of belonging.

We identify with this person and we belong to the movement or cause that this person represents. We saw this all the way in chapter 1, verse 12. I follow Paul.

I follow Apollos. I follow Cephas. Or I follow Christ. There's this commitment to a leader in boasting that reveals actually that worldly wisdom that we value.

And Paul's concerned about this because he says if we're not careful then our faith will eventually come to rest on this leader on this worldly wisdom and not on Christ himself.

[ 11 : 54 ] I just want to pause here for a moment and ask a simple discernment question. How do we know if this is actually starting to happen in our lives? I think one way and this is something I've seen in my own life or in the lives of others is when we have a favorite leader and they are shown to be weak and fallible how do we respond to that?

Do we on the one hand deny it and shield our eyes from it? Or on the other hand do we acknowledge it yet our faith is shaken by it? And I'm afraid that a lot of de-churched persons are suffering the pain of this.

And one of the things that it reveals is that our sense of belonging if it rests on a particular leader and not on Christ himself if our sense of belonging rests on a particular human leader then our faith will always be unstable and our sense of self will always be shaky.

So how does Paul respond to this? In a brilliant pastoral move Paul undercuts the logic of their boasting in a way that honors rather than diminishes them.

It's actually quite amazing. In verses 21 to 23 he applies a gospel reversal. Notice how in chapter 1 they said I follow Paul I follow Apollos I follow Cephas.

[ 13 : 21 ] Well here they're saying I belong to these leaders Paul flips it on his head. He said all things are yours whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas whether the world or life or death the present or the future all are yours.

What's Paul doing? He's saying you are viewing the church as belonging to its leaders and I'm actually saying the leaders belong to the church. He's flipping it on its head.

He's saying the pastor should never be able to say this is my church but the church should always be able to say this is my pastor. And he does even more than that in verse 23 he says you the church are Christ's and Christ is God's.

So he's saying not only is your self-perception out of whack but your whole worldview needs a correction. The gospel expands your worldview to see up and down and how far and wide is the reign of Christ and God over all things.

So he's saying you've really gotten stuck on thinking about your life on a way too human level here. This in the end is all about the supremacy of Christ and the excellency of God who is all over all.

[ 14 : 33 ] And it's from this vantage point I think that leading them to the mountaintop of Christ's excellency that Paul wants the Corinthians then to look back on himself and view his own ministry among them.

And this is where Paul then gets into their prejudice. He says not only have you do you have a deep-seated pride issue but you have a prejudice issue and this shows up in how you relate to me and how you relate to those that I minister with and this is what all of chapter 4 is about.

And Paul gives two images that focus on faithfulness to the master as the key concern and motivation for the church's leaders. Verse 1 This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and as stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful or trustworthy. Two images servants and stewards.

The word for servants is that word for under rower. Ancient Greek warships they would have soldiers on the top and they'd have three stories in the bowels of the boat of rowers who were propelling the ship through the waters.

[ 15 : 50 ] And the particular word that Paul uses here is for the lowest of the three tiers of rowers at the bottom of the boat. Paul's saying think of us as the bottom of the barrel servant labor.

And Paul's saying I serve the captain of the boat. And then he brings up this image of stewards which changes things from marine to domestic imagery. If the servant is an under rower the steward is a housekeeper.

It's the person who has been trusted to manage the master's household. To keep things clean. To make sure it's stocked with food. To be ready to receive guests.

To steward money and business affairs with integrity. And in the parables we, in the gospels we get parables that talk about how we need to do this in ways that we live diligently in expectation of the return of the master.

Which is precisely where Paul goes. The coming of Christ. So Paul is saying think of us not only as the bottom of the barrel servant labor but think of us as faithfully stewarding the household of the master.

[ 16 : 58 ] As faithfully distributing the riches of the master to all his guests. And it's this theme of faithfulness of trustworthiness of responsibility to the master that then leads Paul to talk about judgment.

Because he believes that if he is a servant of the master a steward of the master then ultimately it's the master's opinion that's the only one that matters in his life. And so we get in verse 3 and following four times he mentions this language of judgment.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. And he goes like in fact I don't even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself but I am not thereby acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore and here's his third negative exhortation do not pronounce judgment before the time before the Lord comes who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and disclose the purposes of the heart that each one will receive his commendation or his praise from God.

Paul knows that having a judgmental attitude seeks it wreaks havoc on the community of Christ. In our own hearts in the way we are postured towards one another in the decisions we make and why we make them in our witness to the world I mean I could give you two or three examples of churches in Vancouver right now where this is wreaking havoc in their leadership and communities and so Paul leads them to Christ who is the judge and he says that Christ is the only one who will reveal because he's the only one who can see the hidden motivations of the heart and in their fighting and biting the Corinthian Christians are assuming a position as judge that is not their role to take this is the essence of prejudice if you read any of Jane Austen's novels she'll help you see it coming to a premature judgment of someone based on external appearances rather than internal realities trying to play God without knowing what God knows therefore says Paul do not pronounce judgment before the time that is before Christ himself comes to do the work of judgment now this creates a tension of sort because some of you may say well isn't the whole letter of first

[ 19 : 40 ] Corinthians in some sense Paul making judgments about the Corinthians isn't there some sense in which he is listing all the things where the Corinthians have strayed from the gospel and they've just got it wrong and he's saying yeah you've got this wrong and you've got to do something about it so isn't that itself a form of judgment and so is there an ironic contradiction in Paul saying do not judge in order to make sense of this I think we have to say something like this Paul is not negating all judgment all opinions all decisions and discernment Paul is negating a certain attitude of judgmentalism that if it infects our hearts it will destroy the church so there's a difference here between the judgmentalism that breeds contempt and bitterness and the wise discipline that is for the sake of somebody's good and motivated by love and this I think is the key difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the cross and we're going to hear all about it in 1

Corinthians chapter 13 the wisdom of the cross does not avoid all judgment but it leaves judgment to God whereas the wisdom of the world takes judgment into its own hands or another way to put it is the wisdom of the cross is motivated by love and the wisdom of the world is motivated by a sense of superiority and pride over other people and this is why Paul speaks of the reality of judgment I think here in a pretty pleasant and positive note notice here his applications of judgment are positive for the most part it's the one who will come in light to judge is the one who already came in love to save and so Christ feels freed from the slavery of others opinions of him and Christ and Paul feels encouraged to stay the course in faithful and sacrificial ministry because he knows that Christ will reveal what others did not see he knows that

Christ will bring to light what others did not know about the hidden motivations of his heart and so no matter how much he has been misunderstood or his actions have been misinterpreted or he has taken flack for the way that he has sought to serve the master he knows that the master himself sees what has motivated his heart and for Paul that is reason for good news he can entrust himself to the creator Paul says in verse six this will be the beginning of next week's passage in chapter four I have applied all these things to myself and to Apollos for your benefit brothers and sisters that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written and that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another brothers and sisters this is how the gospel transforms our hearts it transforms our hearts so that what we long for is no longer the praise and the applaud that can be gained in this life but what we long for is that when

Christ comes again and he looks into the depths of our hearts on that final day we hear him say well done good and faithful servant well done good and faithful servant and because we have treasured his words from from all our lives we will find that his words bring us more joy than the claim and affirmation and opinion of any other could possibly Christ came once to save us and he will come again to judge us but if we know his love and his mercy and his might and this indeed is a happy thing brothers and sisters I speak these things to you in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit amen he can do it anyway i check the other way he can do it with