

The Only Eyes That Matter // 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

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[0:00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

If you would remain standing, grab your Bibles, and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 3. 1 Corinthians 3, chapter 18, and we're actually going to go into chapter 4, verses 1 through 5.

1 Corinthians 3, starting in 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 is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are 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, or the future, or the future, or the future, or the future, or the future, or the future, or the future.

[1:46] And Christ is God's. Chapter 4, verse 1. This is how you should regard us. As servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

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

In fact, I do not 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, 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.

[2:51] Then, each one will receive his commendation from God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may take your seats. Who are you with?

In the early 2000s, the brand new show, American Idol, became a cultural phenomenon.

Specifically because it gave the audience the power to cast their votes for their favorite contestants through their phones. What an incredible thing.

Voting for contestants was no new thing. But that combo of the internet and texting, it revolutionized the ability for more watchers not only to vote, but also to voice their allegiances to certain contestants.

[3:52] So by the time Carrie Underwood won season four, the show was receiving over 500 million votes per season.

Which was more than, at the time, many political elections. So there were these viral fan armies that started to display their commitment to certain performers online.

Singer Clay Aiken had his fans the Claymates. Taylor Hicks had the Soul Patrol. Adam Lambert had the Glamberts. So in a new way, the audience could demonstrate their allegiances.

Whether it was vocal range, or stage presence, or good looks, or that tearjerker story. People received a voice to answer that question, Who are you with?

Which is your idol? Well, something similar is going on in Corinth. Even though they didn't have texting, there were some in the church trying to get everyone to play Corinthian idol.

[5:04] Who are you with? Which church leader is the best? Who do you support? Some were saying, I follow Paul. Some were saying, I follow Apollo.

Some were saying, I follow Cephas. And Paul has been arguing since chapter one that this way of thinking about leaders in God's church is no different than the way the world thinks.

They're importing these worldly categories into the church and dividing over which Christian leader they judge to be most influential, or the most effective, or the most eloquent.

They are dividing allegiances, and they are dividing the church. So Paul is adjusting their distorted view of Christian leaders.

But he's doing this by confronting their standards of wisdom. Wisdom. This wisdom that they're embracing is not just different wisdom.

[6:03] This is the enemy of God's wisdom. And if we're not careful, we can make the same errors within Trinity Grace Church.

We can be tempted to import worldly values when it comes to how we relate to the opinions and the preferences of people. Oh, but God is so kind, isn't he?

To provide us this passage. To guard us. To help us. Not only does he give us help in how to rightly relate to and appreciate church leaders, which is the direct application of this text, he also gives us a much broader vision for how the cross transforms our understanding of wisdom.

It's a broader vision for how the glories of being united in Christ's church changes everything. It's a broader vision of living in view of God's just and final judgment. So we are not competitors in this church.

We are co-laborers in this church for the cause of Christ. Very simply, if I were to try to sum it up as a main idea, it seems this text is saying, faithfully labor together in light of the cross to serve others for the glory of our God.

[7:24] I'm going to try to break this out into three points, which I think are true to the text. True wisdom flows from God. We'll begin there. True wisdom flows from God.

Take a look at verse 18. It says, Let no one deceive himself. None of us is exempt from this temptation, from being self-deceived, from being wise according to this age.

I mean, that's exactly what the Corinthians were doing. They wanted to be wise. That was their problem, actually. They began to smuggle in the world's wisdom.

Verse 19 says, The wisdom of this world is folly, foolishness with God. So what is this worldly wisdom they're smuggling in?

To say it concisely, it's life lived without reference to God. Life lived without reference to God.

[8:35] Ever since Eden, people have been trying to live apart from God's authority, from God's design, from God's law. Taking matters into our own hands, based on our own perceptions of how things should be.

We may no longer be in the garden, but we still try to make the most of the world without reference to the creator of the world.

Tomorrow morning, alarms will go off and we'll set out to the races. People who are self-sufficient, motivated by selfish ambition, pursuing self-exaltation, will set out with all their hearts to pursue the best that this world has to offer.

The best. Power. Prestige. Recognition. Wealth. Health. Pleasure. Security. That's it. That's the bundle.

These are the things that preoccupy people each and every day from morning to night. And even in a town like this that's filled with churches and filled with Bibles, it's possible and even probable for most people in our community to live without reference to God and to chase these things with all of their hearts.

[10:13] But we've got to pay attention here. because churches can direct criticism against the world out there. But Paul's not directing this letter to the world out there.

That's not his big concern. Look again at the text. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let the one among you become a fool.

That's so intensely personal. It's not guns aimed out there. It's look at yourselves. Paul's addressing professing Christians operating like the world in the church.

Worldly values have been smuggled in. They're causing divisions. But we, my friends, we are called to something different. We're called to be fools in the eyes of the world. Just think about what we're doing here right now.

Think about the foolishness that we're doing. I mean, what would the world apart from God think about what's happening in this room? We've got a bunch of unrelated people waking up at the crack of dawn in order to convert a basketball court into an auditorium.

[11:35] I mean, we're setting up chairs, we're setting up cables, we're setting up screens. And what is it that we're doing once we get it all set up? We're singing to, we're praying to, we are serving an immaterial being that was represented by a Middle Eastern man thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away.

That's what we're doing. We believe that this man was the incarnation of God. We believe he did miracles to validate his identity. We believe that this ancient book right here reveals perfectly and authoritatively all that we need to know to receive salvation, to live a life pleasing to this immaterial being.

In fact, we gather to sit under teaching like right now from this ancient book for nearly half of our time together so that we can have our values shaped by this thing.

That's different than the world. In contrast to the world, we believe that we were created and that we belong body and soul to that creator.

He has rights over us. We believe that our biggest problem is not circumstances. It's not lack of education. It's not poverty. It's not oppression. We believe our biggest problem as presented in this book is sin.

[12:52] It's sin that separates us from a holy God. We also believe that this holy God sent his son as a substitute for sinners so that we can be made righteous and reconnected to God in relationship.

We believe we are not to be anxious about anything. Not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth.

Not to return evil for evil. We believe we are to love our enemies. Pray for those who persecute us. To rejoice always even in suffering.

We believe we are to confess our sins to one another. To forgive others as we have been forgiven by God himself.

We believe that the meek shall inherit the earth. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. And it is more blessed to give than to receive. We believe that dependence on God is real strength and we believe that dying in Christ is real gain.

[14:07] That's stupid to the world. That's foolishness. If your main preoccupation is to pursue the power the prestige the recognition the wealth the health the pleasure the security that this world has to offer the wisdom of God will look stupid.

It will. It's foolish. But on the flip side what our text says is that the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God.

That's actually the dumb thing to do. So that's what Paul is highlighting verses 19 to 20. He's referencing Job he's referencing Psalm 94 saying that those who believe they can follow the wisdom of this world will eventually be ensnared in their own craftiness.

Essentially wisdom that the world offers apart from God is futile. It uses that word futile. It's everything all those pursuits it's vanity meaningless is what it's saying.

That's the sum of the wisdom of the world's pursuits. So in other words brothers sisters you will be labeled.

[15:35] You will be labeled a fool no matter which way you slice it but according to who. There's only two options that the scripture presents to us.

You will be a fool but by whose standards which one will you choose? Would you rather be called a fool by the world or be called a fool by God Almighty?

Which one do you want to choose? In a traditional factory setting one person on the line will keep an eye out for those defective products moving along that conveyor belt and if the standard was not met a label would be put on and then they would be discarded.

Imagine that same position being occupied by the world and by the Lord. By the world and by the Lord.

If your life were laid out on the conveyor belt what label would be placed on it by the inspectors which person would put the label on your life.

[16:54] Is your singleness is it being used for frivolous or selfish gain or for serving others and seeking to learn and to grow?

Is your marriage dominated by what you can get out of it and how it makes you feel or is it characterized by burden bearing leadership and respectful submission that reflects Christ in the church?

One of those is foolish but according to who? Is work a way to make a name for yourself and appear busy or indispensable or is it a means to provide for your needs and to honor the Lord? What about your relationships, finances, your ambitions? You will be labeled a fool no matter what. Whose foolish label would be placed on your life today? Is it clear who you are living to serve? We need true wisdom.

[18:01] We need true wisdom. I invite you to the cross of Jesus Christ this morning. The cross is where all things are transformed ultimate weakness transformed shame into divine power and salvation.

The wisdom of Christ offers power and weakness glory and suffering and life through death. That's what's available at the cross. This wisdom is going to transform us from the inside out and it continues to shape us as a church family.

So how does this transformed vision of wisdom come to bear on this issue that we're looking at in Corinth this factionalism and disunity let's look at point two right boasting centers on God says in verse 21 if you look with me because of Christ's wisdom verse 21 let no one boast in men in the game of Corinthian idol they've been choosing sides the ones that seem to have the strongest gifting or presence or oratory ability they're using worldly standards and they've been boasting in men I belong to Paul I belong to Apollos I belong to Cephas but this boasting my friends is just completely misplaced that word boast that they use here it's this idea of to glory in to revel in it's ascribing to the creature what only belongs to

God himself that's what's going on here so this really is Corinthian idol to lay it out that way because idolatry is displacing the creator with the creation that's what idolatry is they are motivated by pride by personal preferences and they are putting their allegiances into men who weren't even competitors to begin with that wasn't even the game they didn't sign up for that so this man centered boasting is what Paul is condemning as foolish worldly!

wisdom just imagine for a minute a massive passenger boat boat that has sunk in the ocean and it leaves thousands of people scattered and floating in different directions drowning starvation thirst sharks it's only a matter of time for these people and on their own they are as good as dead now imagine that that a large boat sets out with the purpose of pulling passengers out of the water and out of certain death the captain himself ties a rope around his waist anchors it to the other end of the boat he himself jumps into the water pulls fearful exhausted people one after the other from the water onto the boat as these people they begin to regain their senses and their strength the captain puts them to work on the boat some are sent to pull others that are helpless into the boat and still others begin to care for the different problems once they're on the boat they bring food they bring warm clothes they bring comforting words now some of the rescued folks are increasingly in awe of the worker who pulls the people up out of the water he he's just so bold and strong and courageous it's just wonderful look at him and suddenly they begin to think how his job is really the most important one since the other workers if you think about it they wouldn't even have a job if it wasn't for this guy pulling him out of the water and soon comparison begins to creep in on the boat and others who were served this hot meal got warm clothes they begin to think about how kind and how compassionate those workers were toward them and they start to reflect on how this was much different than the worker who pulled me into the boat that worker seemed impersonal and maybe a little too intense for their liking and he kind of hurt them as he grabbed them by the shirt to drag them in they much prefer the warm and compassionate demeanor of the food server and before long there are preferences and then preferences turn into prejudices and then prejudices divide and destroy and if left unchecked those who were pulled from the water begin to look around and they begin to think how much nicer the boat would be if some had been left in the water wouldn't it be great wouldn't it be smoother

[23:21] Nicer! What is it that they are missing? They're on the boat!

They're on the boat! This is incredible! They should all be dead but they're on the boat! That's what they're missing!

They're on the boat! How did they get there? Because the captain was so kind to come for them! And then he commissioned servants that he saved to help save and to serve others!

It's incredible! Some were suited more to pull people up and out of the water and onto the boat!

Some were suited to serve and to strengthen people but they are not competitors they're co-laborers they're co-laborers for the mission of the captain that's what they're doing!

So how insane is it for the ones who are saved to become the ones who are segregated? How crazy is that? How crazy is it to rally behind the workers as if one was superior to the other? [24:40] And this is exactly the point Paul is making to those wanting to play Corinthian idol. In verse 21 and 22 he says don't boast in men for all things are yours whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas don't boast about a worker no that's crazy you don't belong to them they belong to you that's what he he's flipping it all upside down or right side up why is this?

Because all of these workers from the ones who pulled you in to the ones who warmed you up all of them belong to the captain and all of them are working for your good on his behalf that's what they're up to so don't boast in the worker boast in the captain of the!

who set you out of the water Paul has given us a divine perspective on how we as a congregation should relate to the leaders of this church pastors deacons ministry leaders these people are gifts from God they're intended to serve God's people to serve you so so yes take note of their gifts appreciate them that's that's wonderful but don't compare them up against your preferences don't do that do not restrict your allegiance or your appreciation to a particular pastor or worker that worldly impulse leads to division it actually robs you it robs you from receiving a broader range of grace from more of God's people for your good oh there's a wonderful point of contrast Paul makes beginning in verse 21 it says you don't belong to

Paul you don't belong to Apollos you don't belong to Cephas as if that were even an option no instead Paul Apollos Cephas are all together and they all belong to you and to translate that to y'all it goes from my preference to no these are given to y'all together it's it's a wonderful transformation but if that wasn't enough to drive it all home Paul seemingly expands or maybe even explodes the point by going on in verse 21 he says not only are these leaders yours but so is the world life death the present and the future I wrestled with that for a little about I don't know what he's talking about here but think about what he's saying worldly wisdom that is earthbound it boasts in leaders we got that but the cross sets us free from this foolish thinking because leaders in the church are actually servants that belong to

God so what else belongs to God that serves the purposes for his people so it's here that Paul lists things that apart from God are often seen as these tyrannies against human existence things were up against the world life death time without God all these things are constantly vying for your attention and demanding your service but how does the cross transform these Gordon Fee wonderfully says it this way for Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus marked the turning point of the ages in such a way that nothing lies outside Christ's jurisdiction in the form of a cross God has planted his flag on planet earth and marked it off as his own possession hence the world is his we die but life cannot be taken from us we live the life of the future in the present age right now and therefore the present has also become our possession for those in

[29:05] Christ Jesus what things were formerly tyrannies are now their new birth right the future is no cause for panic it's already theirs in light of such expansive realities how can the Corinthians say I am of Paul or I am of Apollos that is too narrow it's too constricted of a view Apollos and Paul and Peter and the whole universe is yours you do not belong to them they belong to you as your servants because you and they are Christ and Christ is God's hallelujah that's incredible when you are in Christ Jesus there is a dramatic shift from a fractured individualism to spectacular unity as heirs of the living God at the cross Christ transforms and secures every empty promise that the world makes and then he fills it up with his eternal grace that's what he does we think about it this way we are no longer scrambling for worldly power set free because all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to

Christ who do we belong to I'm with him Jesus Christ therefore all power is ours in the whole world all power we are no longer scrambling for worldly!

recognition because Christ alone lived the perfect life and one day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord perfect recognition where it actually is due we're no longer scrambling for wealth because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it and we are co-heirs with Christ we're no longer scrambling for health and just fearing death at every turn because the sting of death has been disarmed at the cross and the Lord will one day wonderfully wipe every tear from our eyes forever we're no longer scrambling for pleasure because Christ has set us free from the slavery to pleasure so that we can enjoy his good gifts rightfully right now while we patiently wait to enter into the presence of

God where there are pleasures forever more we're no longer scrambling for security because Christ will provide for every need until he takes us home and then after that no one will snatch us from his hand or separate us from his love forever amen isn't that incredible I mean he's transformed every worldly pursuit so where should our boasting go in that situation should it be in men to God's workers no no we will not boast in anything no gifts no power no wisdom we will boast in Jesus Christ his death and resurrection that's true wisdom and right boasting it's anchored in the cross of Christ it leads to right boasting not in men but in the God who saves sinners like me and you so how could we think rightly about

Christian leaders in the church Paul here he recasts their Corinthian idol perspective in verses 1 through 5 of chapter 4 in light of God's wisdom so let's look at that number three real judgment is rendered by God real judgment he's setting it straight verse 1 this is how one should regard us not like that but like this as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God not as competitors but as co-laborers who are servants first and foremost to Jesus Christ so the proper paradigm is this all Christian leaders belong to Christ they are gifts to us but they do not exist to please us or accommodate our sinful preferences their primary role as it says here is as a steward now a steward in this time was this preeminent servant in a

[34:12] Greco-Roman household they managed their masters finances property and other workers so the steward owned virtually nothing but controlled virtually everything so the steward wielded this vast delegated authority and now this is the term that's applied to the leaders of the local church so in the context we're looking at the leaders the the corinthians are trying to exalt and lift up they should be understood as household servants in the house of god they are to steward the mysteries of god namely the gospel christ and him crucified so paul clarifies that this requires faithfulness above above all else faithfulness to this stewardship is paramount it's on that basis that the steward will be judged but who is the judge very important question and that's what paul is clarifying for us he's saying the leaders of this church are gifts to you but they do not belong to you they are here to serve you but they but you are not their master does that make sense so paul is he arguing that oh leaders don't need any accountability they just do whatever they want no the context is that these corinthians they're setting their own standards and they're rendering judgment detached from the right standard and actually devoid of real authority that's what they're doing here so look at verse three paul says it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court in fact

I don't even judge myself for I am not aware of anything against myself but I am not thereby acquitted so your judgment a court's judgment even my own judgment it doesn't hold up none of these are actually the right standard or carry real authority why well our friend Jim Donahue he tells the story when he was a kid playing with his buddies at their dad's house and at the time WWF wrestling was the big thing you know the fake wrestling where they slam each other hit each other chairs so they always wanted to go crazy and wrestle in the den of the house he said they would push couches around and they would jump off and make mounds of cushions so they could do body slams the problem was that they were not supposed to wrestle in this room so what if the friend insists oh it's okay renders judgment this is fine or even what if there's a consensus among all of the wrestlers that these particular wrestling moves are okay and very unlikely to cause any couch cushion damage in the house so of course we should be able according to us to do this would these opinions and counsels stand well for a while they may enjoy wrestlemania they may work out a system that works for them for a little bit but then eventually the front door would open footsteps would make their way down the hall and all opinions and counsels melt away when dad got home because it was his house not their house

Paul's saying this world is God's house the whole thing the judgments of men and even ourselves all of them will be subjected to God's supreme standard and authority he's the sovereign and the just judge of all you didn't make yourself where'd you come from the creator created you shouldn't he have a say in what you do he's coming down the hall so Paul gives this sober warning to those who think they have free reign to call the shots in God's house and they think they can render judgment in the place of God he says in verse five that no one should pronounce judgment before the time before the

Lord comes why is that it's because the Lord in his perfect timing he will bring perfect justice perfect justice according to his standard verse five says he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart so you think about his perfect light will flood the

dark house of every heart to expose the cockroaches of jealousy and of bitterness and gossip and anger and malice and slander and pride he's coming in perfect light to expose it all even the things that have been dressed up and painted over in this life the Lord he will render truthfully in accord with our motivations and every one of us everyone in here will give an account before him the awesome judge the Lord is coming down the hall for anyone in here this morning that has been living without reference to this

Lord in his house I want to call you to repent I want to call you to turn away from what you're doing there is still hope right now in Jesus Christ if you confess your sins and your need for a savior in Jesus Christ the judge listen to this the judge will give you full pardon he'll do it and instead of being treated as a trespasser on his property this judge he will adopt you and give you the rights and privileges as a son in his house that's what's in store for you if you repent now listen the sons are judged too just to be clear but in a different way the Lord relates to the trespasser and to the son differently in judgment look at the end of verse 5 it is a total surprise the end of verse 5 each one will receive his commendation before God you almost have to do a double take there see this this is not about their reconciliation with God as a trespasser but their service for God that's what they're receiving judgment on so being a former trespasser we might think that there was a typo in the Bible we look at that and we might expect okay he's going to bring condemnation no it wasn't a typo he said commendation not condemnation commendation on the day think about this on the day most to be feared of our whole lives for all eternity is standing before God the judge when the illumination of God's perfect light brings all thoughts all actions all deeds all motivations into view clearly before the only eyes that ultimately matter and on that day for those who are children of God in Christ

[42 : 32] Jesus that day will be filled with degrees not of condemnation but commendation isn't that amazing commendation do you see God is so kind that he makes trespassers and lawbreakers into his beloved children through Jesus Christ and then he calls us to work for his purposes in the world which we are totally unfit for and then he gives us what we need to carry out the work and then it goes on at the end of all time as insufficient and as ineffective as we are on our own he rewards us on the basis of being faithful that's what he's up to he rewards us for humbly!

relying on him and serving others in his name this is shocking if you're not shocked this you got to read it again this is shocking CJ Mahaney helpfully summarize it this way God gives us grace and then rewards us for the grace that he gave God gives us grace and then he rewards us for the grace that he gave get a picture it's worth it hang it up somewhere it's amazing so brothers and sisters if that is the judgment that we have to look forward to then there is a wonderfully freeing effect on our lives right now right now think about it if the ultimate judgment before the only eyes that matter crescendos in a combination of forgiveness and reward forgiveness and reward then we're set free from living for the opinions and the praises of men we're set free for living for the opinions and the praises of man this is the point Paul is making about about the leaders these workers do not serve for the approval of men they've already received approval from God and what that does it frees them to serve for the glory of that God set free it's not just the workers it's sons and daughters in the house that's what he set you free from he's no longer the judge standing over you but my question is what about you whose judgment matters most to you right now whose courtroom do you find yourself sitting in from whose lips do you long most to hear well done if if you've made your home in any lesser courtroom than

God's courtroom you will find yourself performing endlessly and awaiting approval that will all be in vain it doesn't matter I want to call you out to live in light of the approval you already have received before the judge of all the earth we no longer have to play a version of Corinthian idol we don't have to play it we don't have to play it we have the approval of the king of all the earth so let us be found faithfully laboring together to serve others for the glory of our God as we wait to hear these words on the last day well done good and faithful servant let's pray together oh father we cast ourselves to you you alone have the words of life whom else will we go you sent

Jesus Christ folly to the world but the aroma of salvation to those who are being saved so this morning we lift up high the name of Jesus king of all kings we receive his rendering his judgment we await it and we long to hear those words well done good and faithful servant let us be servants who labor together for the good of Jesus Christ and his glory amen you've been listening to a message given by walt alexander lead pastor of trinity grace church in athens synessey for more information about trinity grace please visit us at