

In our passage for today Paul continues to address the Corinthians factious behavior in declaring their allegiance to a certain teacher and their boast in their ability to wisely choose the best. In doing so Paul is getting down to the core of the issue. Worldly wisdom and a sense of being better than others is antithetical to the Christian faith. We must conform our thinking to the Word of God and die to our old way of seeing life as a competition for superiority (Philippians 2:3<sup>i</sup>).

*<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness,"* 1 Corinthians 3:18,19 Don't deceive yourselves! It is a present imperative command. That means Paul was telling some people in the church in Corinth that their supposed wisdom was self-delusion. They thought they were wiser than others in picking whom they believed to be the best teacher. But that is the wisdom of this age, a passing wisdom that is foolish in God's eyes.

D.A. Carson writes, *The world loves power and prestige; God displays himself most tellingly on the cross, in sublime and wretched weakness—yet that "weakness" effects God's utterly breathtaking redemptive plan, and thus proves stronger than all the world's "strength."* *The world pants after strong leaders, but leaders in the church must first of all be servants of the Lord Christ. The world parades its heroes and gurus; Christians remember that God loves to choose the weak and the lowly and the despised—the nobodies—so that no one may boast before him. The world tries to impress with its rhetoric and sophistication, cherishing form more than content. The apostles of Jesus Christ prize truth above style and quietly refuse to endorse any form that may prove so attractive, even diversionary, that the centrality of gospel truth is jeopardized.*<sup>ii</sup>

Humility must be an attribute of elders (Ephesians 4:2<sup>iii</sup>), and of all who want true wisdom that comes from above (James 3:17<sup>iv</sup>). We must recognize that we are hopeless sinners without the grace of God and His indwelling Spirit. How many Bible professors babble on about Bible theories or Bible criticism and completely miss the main point of Scripture: **Jesus is Lord! We are not!**

God has delivered to us His inspired Word, and yet we often come to it as if it were the opinions of men. We have seen the mathematical wonder Panin found in the Scriptures. It has stood the test of ages and been confirmed by archeology. Even in the last year archeologists had to revise their dating of Israelite palaces by two hundred years confirming the biblical dating of Solomon's palace. Countless lives have been transformed by it. And yet man often puts his opinion above the God breathed Word. It is the Word that was made flesh in Jesus (John 1:14<sup>v</sup>). So, when we reject the Word to stay with our worldly wisdom, we reject something of Christ!

The Old Testament writers had such reverence for Scripture that they wrote songs about it. (See Psalm 119.) To this day Jews keep it in a special closet and would be careful not to touch anything but the handles. They read through the Law and portions of the prophets over a year's time and when they get to the end of the year, they dance around the synagogue with the Torah scroll and all would try to kiss the cover (Simchat Torah). The Word itself declares it is forever fixed in the heavens (Psalm 119:89<sup>vi</sup>). Jesus said it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than the tiniest mark in it to fail (Luke

16:17<sup>vii</sup>). No wonder then that the thoughts of the wise are futile. How we need to humbly conform our thinking to the Word rather than try to interpret the Word to fit our thinking. How foolish to think we can manipulate what God has uttered. That was the very first sin, self-deception thinking we could change what God has spoken (Genesis 3:1<sup>viii</sup>). **Let no one deceive himself!**

*God catches the wise in their craftiness* is the only New Testament quotation from the book of Job (5:13<sup>ix</sup>). It tells us that our manipulation or rejection of God's Word ends up being our own demise. We think we are getting away with something, but it ends up being to our detriment.

Edward Hall's Chronicle tells of Bishop Tonstall's effort to destroy Tyndall's hand copied translations of the Bible into English. The Catholic church had kept the Bible in Latin so the masses would have to come to the church to receive the Catholic interpretation. The Bishop thought if he bought and burned all the English Bibles, he could keep it out of the hands of the commoners. Tyndall surprisingly sold all his copies to the Bishop, but Tyndall then used the proceeds to print on the first printing press many more copies at a more affordable price. God catches the wise in their own craftiness.

**True wisdom will never contradict God's Word and His ways.** The world tells us to do as we wish and use our own wisdom to make it happen. God declares that to be foolishness. Instead, we must look foolish in the eyes of the world by yielding our lives to the wisdom of God in His Word. Our eyes of faith see what is really of value. The worldly wise cannot understand the wisdom of God, but the simplest believer can appreciate it!

<sup>20</sup> *and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."* 1 Corinthians 3:20 Paul adds one more proof text to make his point. He quotes the Septuagint version of Psalm 94:11<sup>x</sup>. Paul's constant references to Scripture show us that even with his great intellect, he knew the wisdom of God had to shape his thinking and guide the advice he gave the churches. How much do we rely on Scripture when we give advice?

The worldly-wise may look like they are accomplishing something, but as we saw in the previous passage, it will not stand when the Day brings the fire to test our works (1 Corinthians 3:13<sup>xi</sup>). They are busying themselves with things that soon pass away.

It is difficult not to care about what people think of you. But we should count it an honor if people think we are foolish for giving our lives and assets to God (Matthew 5:12<sup>xii</sup>). Their thoughts of us are as transitory as their deeds. The only opinion that matters is God's. The thoughts of the worldly-wise are futile.

<sup>21</sup> *So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,* <sup>22</sup> *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,* <sup>23</sup> *and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.* 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 Because the wisdom of this world is folly with God, and because His servants merely proclaim His Word, why boast in men? He already told them to boast in the Lord. (1:31<sup>xiii</sup>). Now he demands that they quit boasting in men. Paul commands us not to do it! *The self-assertiveness of the Corinthians was out of character for Christians. They were acting as if they were their own masters, whereas they really belonged to God.*<sup>xiv</sup>

All that is good and lasting is from our gracious God and is our inheritance in Christ. While none of us are anything without Him, as adopted sons and daughters of God, all things are ours! Why limit ourselves to one teacher. They are all ours and all are

working toward the same end. The created world is ours! And it is filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3<sup>xv</sup>). Life and death are ours, because for us to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21<sup>xvi</sup>). While the world runs from death and clings to life at any cost, the believers know their daily lives and the time of their deaths are in our heavenly Father's hands (Hebrews 2:15<sup>xvii</sup>). We do not need to stress about today or fear illness or accidents because we know the One who holds those details gave Himself for us. Our times are in His hands (Psalm 31:15<sup>xviii</sup>). **You can only truly live when you are not in fear of death.** Then you can be and do whatever God calls you to.

The present and future are ours for we can be led by the Spirit and the Word to be God's instruments in the world. Paul didn't mention the past because there is nothing we can do about it (Philippians 3:13<sup>xix</sup>). But we can certainly ask God how He wants to work through us right now and in the future. We can truly be present as we have no fear when we are in Christ. We can look forward to the future because the hands that hold the future have the love scars that redeemed us (Isaiah 49:16<sup>xx</sup>).

How glorious a future is ours in Christ and eternity in His presence! And best of all, we belong to Jesus, and He is God's beloved Son. Without Him we are nothing, but in Him we have everything! **Can we daily live with that mindset that all is ours in Jesus?** How would it change our generosity? How would it change our daily attitude? And consider how it could curb our covetousness and competition with one another. The Corinthians would abandon their factions if they received it. We must ask ourselves if *we* really believe it. This is one of the truths in Scripture that we have a hard time getting from our head to our heart. Worldly wisdom says it is better to get than to give. Heavenly wisdom says it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35<sup>xxi</sup>).

*No good thing does He withhold from him who walks uprightly* (Psalm 84:11<sup>xxii</sup>). The only One to walk in perfect uprightness was Jesus. By faith in what He did for us, we are in Him. That is the reason Paul could promise that all is ours, for you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Paul repeats the concept in Romans 8:32<sup>xxiii</sup>. If God did not spare His Son to redeem us, is there any good thing He would withhold from us? The meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5<sup>xxiv</sup>)! We are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6<sup>xxv</sup>). The Maker of heaven and earth is our groom, which makes Him our provider and protector. Our eyes should be fixed on our Creator of all things.

Christ is God's. This is not saying that Christ is not one with God, but as Paul clarifies in the letter to the Philippians, Jesus humbled Himself and became one of us, and submitted Himself to the Father. He did it to redeem us. He did it as an example of submission to the will of the Father (Philippians 2:5-8<sup>xxvi</sup>). He demonstrated the wisdom from above.

Do we see living and dying, the present and the future in relationship to God's purposes and plan for His redeemed people? Can we rejoice in both knowing we get to cooperate with the purposes of God in both? If we really grasp hold of this truth, it will transform the way we see the present and the future. What optimism the child of God should have in realizing all is ours!

*<sup>1</sup> This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

1 Corinthians 4:1,2 Don't think of elders as anything more or less than servants of Christ, those who distribute from God's storehouse revelations from God. Paul uses a word for servants here that he uses only here. It is an under-rower (*hyperetes*). A person who

rowed from a lower deck of a ship. Some of us just saw an example of this in the movie Ben Hur. It came to refer to a lowly service. One who takes orders. In other words, apostles just carried out their orders. The word steward was used for the manager of a household. He, too, was a slave, but a master to other servants. Their service in this case is relaying the revelation of God.

People like to make heroes, favorites, who they tout as the best. But Paul is saying they are just God's assistants. They should not be thought of more highly than that. Everyone who ministers to others does so because God is graciously working through a flawed vessel.

The main requirement of elders is that they be faithful or trustworthy to obey their Master and faithful to teach God's Word accurately. So many enter the role but are removed in a short time because they were not called of God. Out of every person who enters the ministry, a majority will change careers within five to nine years. It is demanding of our time. It calls us to greater sacrifice and a higher standard. But the essential need is faithfulness to God and His Word.

Faithfulness is what God is looking for in all His children (1 Peter 4:10<sup>xxvii</sup>). God said to the servants He honors with more responsibility, "Well done good and *faithful* servant." Matthew 25:21<sup>xxviii</sup> That is because God has been so faithful to us. He expects us to be faithful to Him. It sounds like a marriage, and in one sense it is (Ephesians 5:32<sup>xxix</sup>)! How would you rate your faithfulness? Are you obeying all that you know He has asked of you? Are you attentive to hear His directions? Are you feeding your soul with His Word?

<sup>3</sup> *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.* 1 Corinthians 4:3 Paul may have been, as his name suggests, short in stature. His eyes had some kind of affliction. Greeks would have seen that as being cursed by the gods. Some people would have believed that to associate with him might incur the same wrath upon oneself. He had overseen the death of Christians, but now stands on "grace alone." For those reasons, and perhaps others, some preferred to say they were followers of the eloquent Apollos, putting Paul down in the process. Paul didn't care. He doesn't even judge his own standing, except to acknowledge that God called him to be an apostle (1:1<sup>xxx</sup>).

It is good for us to have this humble mindset. It matters not what people think of us. We should only be concerned about how God sees us. We may think He is pleased, but if He is, it is by grace alone and due to being in Christ. If He were to speak to us and point out all our failures, we would probably be undone (Isaiah 6:5<sup>xxxi</sup>). He remembers our frame is but dust and so does not reveal all our flaws at once (Psalm 103:14). Paul knows he will stand before the Judge, as will we all, and only then will the secrets of our hearts will be revealed (Romans 2:16<sup>xxxii</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> *For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.* 1 Corinthians 4:4 He wasn't aware of any sin or unfaithful action, but that doesn't mean he isn't guilty of something. Humans tend to have blind spots regarding our weaknesses or failures. The Lord is the only judge who can deliver an absolutely pure judgment. Knowing this, we should walk humbly with our God and avoid judging others. Remember that the way you judge others, you will be judged (Matthew 7:2<sup>xxxiii</sup>). If you say, "Bring it on!", you do not have the humble awareness that Paul had

here. It is one thing to not be aware of sin. It is another to say you have none (1 Corinthians 10:12<sup>xxxiv</sup>; 1 John 1:8<sup>xxxv</sup>).

*<sup>5</sup> 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.* 1Corinthians 4:5

The Corinthians thought they could judge which teacher was the best, but Paul is telling them only God can truly see the motivations of the heart (Matthew 7:1<sup>xxxvi</sup>; Romans 14:4<sup>xxxvii</sup>). We can't judge one person better than another. Leave that to the Lord! He knows the motives of the heart that we can't see. Someone may be doing something wrong but from a right motive, or doing something that appears to be right with an impure motive. Only God knows. Commendation that matters will come from God. Resist the temptation to judge. Take others' judgments of you to the Lord and His Word asking Him what is true. Our natural reaction is to be defensive, but we should carefully consider criticisms to see if they are addressing one of our blind spots.

D.A. Carson writes, *With the final day of judgment in view, Paul might have been expected to say, "At that time each will receive his rebuke from God." But instead, he says, "At that time each will receive his praise (commendation in ESV) from God" (4:5c). How wonderful! The King of the universe, the Sovereign who has endured our endless rebellion and sought us out at the cost of his Son's death, climaxes our redemption by praising us! He is a wise Father who knows how to encourage even the feeblest efforts of his children. What this way of concluding the paragraph shows is that in this case, at least, God judges less sternly than the self-appointed judges in the church. Paul here presupposes that the leaders in question are not to be disciplined, shut out, ignored; they are bona fide Christian leaders, and on the last day God himself will praise them.*<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In the passage for today we are told to consider ministers for what they are (servants, stewards), know that the judgment and approval of man means little, and that the judgment of Christ is all that matters in the end. All things are ours in Christ Jesus. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we go to His presence. He guides us in the present and has future works prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10<sup>xxxix</sup>). But most of all, we belong to Christ, and Christ is God's beloved Son.

Questions:

- 1 What is the difference between worldly leaders and Christian leaders?
- 2 How deeply do you revere the Word of God?
- 3 Give an example of God catching the wise in their craftiness.
- 4 What are the main differences between wisdom of this age and the wisdom of God?
- 5 What do the final verses of chapter 3 say are ours? Implications?
- 6 How will our lives change if we believe that?
- 7 What does the word "servants" mean in 4:1? Implication?
- 8 What is the main requirement of a steward?
- 9 Why can't man judge perfectly?
- 10 What is the surprise word in 4:5? Why?

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<sup>i</sup> **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

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ii Carson, D. A. (2004). [\*The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians\*](#) (pp. 84–85). Baker Books.

iii **Ephesians 4:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

iv **James 3:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

v **John 1:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

vi **Psalms 119:89 (ESV)**

<sup>89</sup> Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

vii **Luke 16:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

viii **Genesis 3:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”

ix **Job 5:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.

x **Psalms 94:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

xi **1 Corinthians 3:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

xii **Matthew 5:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

xiii **1 Corinthians 1:31 (ESV)**

<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

xiv Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 1 Corinthians p.71

xv **Isaiah 6:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

xvi **Philippians 1:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

xvii **Hebrews 2:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

xviii **Psalms 31:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

xix **Philippians 3:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

xx **Isaiah 49:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

xxi **Acts 20:35 (ESV)**

<sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

xxii **Psalms 84:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

xxiii **Romans 8:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

xxiv **Matthew 5:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

xxv **Ephesians 2:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

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<sup>xxvi</sup> **Philippians 2:5-8 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **1 Peter 4:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Matthew 25:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

<sup>xxix</sup> **Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

<sup>xxx</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Isaiah 6:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

<sup>xxxii</sup> **Romans 2:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **Matthew 7:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **1 Corinthians 10:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

<sup>xxxv</sup> **1 John 1:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> **Matthew 7:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> "Judge not, that you be not judged.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> **Romans 14:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Carson, D. A. (2004). [\*The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians\*](#) (p. 101). Baker Books.

<sup>xxxix</sup> **Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.