

Apostle Paul has been addressing the issue of factions in the church of Corinth. They were dividing up into groups according to which teacher they preferred. It was as if the teacher they followed was the best and therefore made them superior. They were bringing the world's way of esteeming value into the church. Paul started this chapter reminding them that teachers are merely servants and will answer to God for how they handled His Word. Only God can judge whether they were faithful or not. He is the only One who sees the motivations of the heart. In our passage for today Paul continues with a description of how lowly the teacher's role is in the eyes of the world and contrasted their lives with the worldly emphasis of the Corinthian believers (Luke 16:15ⁱ).

⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul has told them, and us as well, how God views teachers. The things that Paul applied were the Scriptures and Scriptural perspectives regarding the role of teachers. He did not want them to go beyond what the Scriptures teach regarding the humble role of teachers. He pointed to Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Corinthians 1:19 *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."* He alluded to Jeremiah 9:23,24 in 1 Corinthians 1:31 *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."* In 1 Corinthians 2:16a, he quoted Isaiah 40:13, *"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct Him."* And in 1 Corinthians 3:19,20 he quoted both Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11. *"He catches the wise in their craftiness,"* and *"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."*

He wanted them to learn not to go beyond what is written, the recorded Word of God. This is the source of every problem in the church and our own lives. We ignore the principles found in the Word. That is either because we are not familiar with the Scriptures, or we are careless or negligent in our application of them. I could tell you story after story of people who left the church thinking they were taking the high road when the basis of their problem was rejection of what the Word clearly teaches. We must decide whether we will submit ourselves to the Word of God.

The very morning I was working on this sermon, Jory sent a text which quoted Andrew Murray. *"A readiness to believe every promise implicitly, to obey every command unhesitatingly, to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God, is the only true spirit of Bible study."* That is where we find our unity. That is when we are one in Christ who is the Word made flesh (John 1:14ⁱⁱ). That is our common ground, the rock on which we stand. But if you bring the world's culture into the church and add their ideas and sayings, you will end up causing division. It is happening throughout the church today with the teaching of Critical Race Theory, Prosperity Gospel, and other unbiblical teaching from the world. Sadly these things are taught in universities and seminaries.

Paul added the reason to not go beyond what is written: *That none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.* We humble ourselves and submit to the mind of Christ revealed in the Word of God or we pridefully think we are better than others. Usually that comes in the form of twisting a verse, usually a single verse, to vindicate one's own idea we would like to implement. In other words, "Listen up people because you all don't get it. I have the truth (or best teacher or a new concept) that you all are missing." And what usually follows in time is, "Follow me, as I am best!" That is **being**

puffed up in favor of one against another. It destroys unity and exalts an individual rather than boasting in the Lord.

The principle of the verses Paul has cited is that man's wisdom is futile. If you are preferring one teacher over another, are you wise enough to know which is best in the eyes of the One who sees the motivation of the heart? If you boast it should only be in the Lord, never in man whose heart you don't know. Teachers will answer to God (James 3:1ⁱⁱⁱ).

The other extreme is thinking too little of our teachers (1 Timothy 5:17^{iv}). The problem is still pride. We might ask ourselves if we believe God is sovereign, and if He is then there must be something God wants us to learn from those whom He has appointed to teach us. That does not mean we shouldn't check their teaching with the Word (Acts 17:11^v), but rather that we should be humbly listening for what God is showing us through that teacher. If what they teach is not in accord with Scripture, bring it to the elders of the church. You may discover your interpretation was wrong, or they may correct the teacher. We should all be submitting ourselves to the Word of God.

When there is an accusation of sin against an elder, two or more persons should bring that to the elders of a church and present their case (1 Timothy 5:19^{vi}). If they are elders chosen according to the Biblical directions (Titus 1:6-9^{vii}), then you should be able to trust their decision. This is why it is so important to make part of your decision in finding a church to look for one that appoints elders as equal and accountable men who know God's Word and have a godly reputation, not merely those who are influential or prosperous or a single pastor who calls all the shots (Titus 1:5^{viii}).

⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? 1 Corinthians 4:7 The first question is difficult to translate. The Greek is literally, "Who distinguishes you?" Fee translates it to the modern equivalent of "Who in the world do you think you are, anyway." I think the idea is that what applies to the teachers applies to us all. It is presumptuous for us to think we can judge God's servants. We cannot judge one another anymore than we can judge one teacher over another. Whatever they have and what we have are gifts from God. **This verse is the great leveler. Everything we have is from God.** He gave us life, health, talents, abilities, family, friends, sustenance, air, etc. We can say without God we are nothing, but take it literally, as we would not even exist without Him.

This is why pride is such a heinous sin. C.H. Spurgeon commented on this verse, "*Pride is the inherent sin of man, and yet it is of all sins the most foolish. A thousand arguments might be used to show its absurdity; but none of these would be sufficient to quench its vitality.*" We owe all to God and yet we often treat Him as if He owes us. "God. I can't believe you would let this happen to me after I've been so faithful!" What a declaration of our fallenness! Instead of thanking God for the time we've had with someone, we turn our backs to God when he takes them away.

What do you have that you did not receive? What a powerfully humbling question! The only honest answer is, "nothing!" All we have came from Him. We owe all to God, which eliminates boasting in man. It directs all praise to where it is due, to God. That does not mean you should avoid encouraging people with a word of appreciation. But perhaps it is best to phrase it in a way that brings God glory, such as, "God is doing great things through you!" Or you could say, "I am blessed by the way you yield to the Lord."

Taking an honest assessment of the gifts we've been given by God should humble us rather than feed our ego (Romans 12:3^{ix}). Those gifts are to be used for God's glory, not ours.

So why do you boast as if you did not receive it? If we boast in our abilities or gifts, the glory is going to the wrong place. Acknowledging what we have been given reminds us of our indebtedness to invest those talents and goods to advance God's kingdom and exalt His name in the earth. We have recently looked at Satan's fall in Ezekiel 28 and we read, Ezekiel 28:17 *¹⁷ Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you.* Proverbs 16:18 *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.* What warnings to not allow the gifts and calling of God to go to our heads and make us fall for the foolish idea that we have made ourselves. How can any believer be so arrogant when we look upon the cross?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! 1 Corinthians 4:8 Do we need a reminder of how blessed we are? Visit a third world mission work? Volunteer at a hospital or hospice facility. One of our attendees, I won't embarrass them by naming them, regularly visited the rehab facility at Kachina Point. He asked which men didn't get visitors. Mind you, he has his own physical difficulties with health, but he went to comfort those who were worse off. Brothers and sisters, most of us are in the same shoes as these Corinthians. We've become rich, like kings.

But where were they spiritually? I believe that is what Paul is addressing. He is telling them that they think they have arrived. They have the best teachers. They have the gifts of the Spirit. They boast in their favorite teacher, while their spiritual poverty is being expressed in the factions they are creating, which is a sign of spiritual immaturity. Paul wishes they were spiritual giants. But spiritual maturity is evidenced by living to serve (Mark 10:45^x), by unity that comes from love, grace, and boasting in Jesus alone.

More than the physical blessings are those blessings we have in knowing our Savior as our redeemer. How many people do you know, family and friends, who have not opened their hearts to the redeeming love of Jesus? They don't know the peace you have. They don't experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit that you do. They live with the fear of death from which you have been set free (Hebrews 2:15^{xi}). How grateful we should be! And yet we know that all this and more is from the gracious hand of God upon our lives (Ezra 8:22^{xii}). How rich we are in the Spirit, all because we have received the free-gift of God. It is good to remind ourselves where we would be without His grace. Brothers and sisters **be as confident in God as you can while maintaining a healthy distrust in your old nature.** Remember that the Lord is our keeper (Psalm 121:5^{xiii}). He is the One who will present you faultless on that day (Jude 24^{xiv}).

This verse reminds us of the Jesus' letter to the church of Laodicea. *¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.* Revelation 3:17-18 Paul is reminding them that though they were well off physically, they were missing spiritual wealth because of their foolish pride. He is about to contrast their wealth with what the apostles endured, the very men they claimed to follow.

⁹ *For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.* 1 Corinthians 4:9 Paul is contrasting the lives of the apostles and what they were enduring for the sake of the gospel with the Corinthians' belief that they had arrived. All but one of the twelve apostles would die as a martyr. Actually, we are all sentenced to death unless the Lord returns first. What counts is what we do with the gift of life until that time comes. The world, angels, and people saw how the apostles were chased from town to town as they sowed the seeds of the message of Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection. Who was really rich? Who was laying up their treasures in heaven?

¹⁰ *We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.* 1 Corinthians 4:10 Remember that in the first chapter Paul declared ²⁵ *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* 1 Corinthians 1:25 Paul is using irony to help them see that they have chosen the way of the world instead of the way of the cross. All of the apostles were examples to them. There will come a time when we will reign and rule as kings, but it is in the future age. As the Corinthians read on, they were starting to see that Paul was talking about the upside-down world of the kingdom. Yes, we are in the kingdom now and have privileges of being in that kingdom (Ephesians 2:5,6^{xv}), but at the present, this world is still fallen and in rebellion toward God (Revelation 11:15^{xvi}). The curse has not been lifted. They were boasting in and proud of worldly things. The honor of this world is almost always given to those whose lives are focused on this world. Paul is reminding them of some of the lessons he had surely taught when he was with them for a year and a half, but they had slipped back into honoring the things the world honors, which means their hearts were not set on things above (Colossians 3:1,2^{xvii}).

Paul continues by giving them a picture of what it is like to live wholly dedicated to God. ¹¹ *To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless,* 1 Corinthians 4:11 This was the life of the apostles as they spread the gospel message. He was saying the future age had not yet come. We are still in this world but not of it (John 17:15,16^{xviii}). We still look for the return of Christ and a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10^{xix}). The apostles' examples reminded the Corinthians that believers do not live for this world or judge by its standards. We are laying up our treasures in heaven while we wait for the world to come.

¹² *and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;* 1 Corinthians 4:12 At first glance, laboring with their own hands seems out of place in this list. But we must understand that the Greek teachers of that day thought laboring was beneath them. They were too educated for manual labor. Paul often supported himself and even those with him with his trade of leather working (Acts 18:3^{xx}). He could repair tents for armies of Rome, or make leather sandals. He took with him the tools of his trade. The Corinthians may have thought this put him on a lower level than some of the other teachers, but Paul presents it as an example for them, a badge of honor.

When reviled they bless. It reminds us of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. ¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* Matthew 5:11-12 This is the example of Christ on the cross forgiving those who crucified Him (Luke

23:34^{xxi}). We should understand that they do not know what they are doing. We should be glad to be associated with the persecuted prophets who came before us. All of these descriptions are reminding the Corinthians they were being too worldly minded. They lost touch with the humble example of Jesus that Paul demonstrated to them.

¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. 1 Corinthians 4:13 Surely Paul knew of the prophetic description of the Messiah in Isaiah 53:2b, 3 and had adopted it as his own standard. *^{2b} he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* The Corinthians were probably also familiar with the passage, as we should be.

What did this all say to the readers then and to us today? It should come as a sober shaking that we can so easily be caught up with the ways of this world and what it esteems. We can easily forget that man's ways are not God's ways (Isaiah 55:8^{xxii}), and that we should expect hardship for the cause of Christ (Acts 14:22^{xxiii}), not a bed of roses. When we read the testimonies of the great servants of God, we see they all faced hardships of one kind or another. Why would our lives be any different? It isn't wrong to desire comfort and pleasure, unless they come at the cost of denying our service to the Lord. If it comes at the cost of disobedience, our goals are no different from those of worldly people.

What are the gifts and abilities God has given you? How can you use them for the glory of God? How can you use them to advance God's kingdom by discipling new believers or helping someone who is (Matthew 28:19,20^{xxiv})? Are you laying up treasures on earth or in heaven? Paul's personal example challenged them to stop thinking like the world around them and to fix their eyes on Jesus, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despised the shame and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2^{xxv}). That is our example! This world is not our home! Take up your cross and follow Him (Matthew 16:24^{xxvi})! Rejoice in the trials of this life as a good soldier of Jesus (James 1:3^{xxvii}; 2 Timothy 2:3^{xxviii}). Lay up your treasures in heaven. Do all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31^{xxix}).

Benediction: *²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.* 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Questions:

- 1 What does "go beyond what is written" mean?
- 2 Review the Andrew Murray quote.
- 3 Review the three questions in verse 7.
- 4 How can we properly encourage people?
- 5 Where can we look to keep us from arrogance?
- 6 What are you most grateful for?
- 7 Who was rich? (trick question)
- 8 Who was being foolish?
- 9 What are we waiting for?
- 10 What do we do until then?

ⁱ **Luke 16:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

ⁱⁱ **John 1:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ **James 3:1 (ESV)**

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

^{iv} **1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

^v **Acts 17:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

^{vi} **1 Timothy 5:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

^{vii} **Titus 1:6-9 (ESV)**

⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

^{viii} **Titus 1:5 (ESV)**

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

^{ix} **Romans 12:3 (ESV)**

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

^x **Mark 10:45 (ESV)**

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

^{xi} **Hebrews 2:15 (ESV)**

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

^{xii} **Ezra 8:22 (ESV)**

²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.”

^{xiii} **Psalms 121:5 (ESV)**

⁵ The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

^{xiv} **Jude 1:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,

^{xv} **Ephesians 2:5-6 (ESV)**

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—
⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

^{xvi} **Revelation 11:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”

^{xvii} **Colossians 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

^{xviii} **John 17:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

^{xix} **Hebrews 11:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

^{xx} **Acts 18:3 (ESV)**

³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

^{xxi} **Luke 23:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

^{xxii} **Isaiah 55:8 (ESV)**

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

^{xxiii} **Acts 14:22 (ESV)**

²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

^{xxiv} **Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

^{xxv} **Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

^{xxvi} **Matthew 16:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

^{xxvii} **James 1:2 (ESV)**

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

^{xxviii} **2 Timothy 2:3 (ESV)**

³ Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

^{xxix} **1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)**

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.