

## **1 Corinthians 3:18-23** **A Sermon**

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We are continuing this week in our study of Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, picking up at verse 18 of chapter 3 and working through to the end of that chapter. In our study, we have divided the letter into two main parts. In the first part, Paul is responding to *things he has heard about* and in the second half of the letter he is responding to *questions he has been asked*. We are still in that first section, dealing with problems Paul has heard about, and indeed WILL be in that section up until the end of chapter 6.

Now in this section, we have been looking at the first problem that has come to Paul's attention - the problem of division. Thus far, we have seen that the problem of division had at its roots some faulty thinking on the Corinthians' part in at least two areas: 1) how they understood wisdom and 2) how they thought about leaders and ministry.

While Paul has already said most of what he wants to say about wisdom and has moved on to the matter of leaders and ministry, he pauses here, in 3:18-23, to make a preliminary summation and conclusion to what he has said about these things thus far, which results in his issuing two command/warnings that he wants the Corinthians to take on board. We will be looking at both of those instructions this morning, but before we do that, let's pray together. (Pray and read passage)

The first command/warning that Paul issues, as a result of what he has said thus far, is pretty direct: *Let no one deceive himself* in the ESV or the NIV's even more forceful, "*Do not deceive yourselves*". What Paul is referring to is made clear by what he says next, as well as the general context of the letter up to this point. In the words that follow, Paul talks about those among the Corinthians who think themselves to be wise - and, in so doing, recalls the whole discussion of wisdom found in 1:18 - 2:16.

If you remember our previous studies on those passages it would seem that in Paul's absence some leaders have arisen in Corinth who have begun to feel that the message of the Cross was too limited, too simple, and altogether too negative. In it's place they were evidently preaching a message that they felt was a "deeper" wisdom, a message which left the Cross behind and began to explore other more "fascinating" and speculative ideas which were further add further removed from what Paul taught them.

To all those - both leaders and followers - in Corinth who have "deceived

themselves" by embracing this so-called "deeper wisdom" which opposed or ignored or marginalized the truth of Christ crucified - to all of those people Paul says "become a fool".

Now Paul does not mean "become a fool in all things". He is not saying that the Corinthians are to go about making complete idiots of themselves. He is not telling them to let go of every kind of wisdom but only that sort of wisdom that presents itself as "spiritual" but which is NOT and is centered upon something other than the Cross of Christ.

Paul wants them to let go of all such so-called "wisdom" and embrace again that which the world calls foolishness - a theology that centers around a crucified Savior, sent by God to redeem the world.

When Paul says to them "become a fool", then, he is offering them the ANTIDOTE for their self-deception. He is showing them how to respond to his command for them not to deceive themselves. The cure and prevention for self-deception lies in their going back to the truth that they first received through Paul and using THAT as a point of reference for everything else, especially any sort of teaching that is being advertised as a "new" and "deeper" wisdom but which, sadly, does not have the Cross at its center.

So, Paul's command/warning is: *don't be deceived* and the antidote for self-deception is: become a fool, which is shorthand for "come back to the truth you first received". And the motivation provided here for doing those things is because the wisdom of mere people is always shown to be of no ultimate value and so, in the end, is futile.

As support for this last assertion, Paul leans on two Old Testament passages to make his point, quoting firstly from Job 5:13 and then from Psalm 94:11. In Job, if you remember, we have a person who undergoes the most severe of human trials and, in his misery, some friends come to him and offer him lots of what they consider to be "wise counsel". One of those that offers counsel to Job is a guy named Eliphaz - whom Paul is quoting here. Ironically, Eliphaz, who says to Job, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness" is later on in the book shown to be a prime example of that as he is rebuked by God for his foolish and unhelpful counsel.

In the quotation from Psalm 94 Paul (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, mind you) translates the text with two slightly different renderings. Where Psalm 94 says "man" Paul says "the wise" and where the text says "but a breath" Paul uses the equivalent expression "futile". So, without changing the sense of the passage, Paul uses linguistically equivalent expressions to draw support from this OT text as well. The point Paul is making - with this and the previous quotation - is that human wisdom is impotent and insufficient and will always show itself to be futile in the end. That being the case, it is crazy for the

Corinthians to continue down a path that will ultimately be proven worthless and meaningless because it is a path that is dependent upon the "wisdom" of humankind, and not on the so-called "foolishness" of God.

Now, this warning that Paul gives to the Corinthians in his day, is one which we would do well to consider in our own. The command "*Do not deceive yourselves*" is much needed in the contemporary church. We live in a day when new ideas and "deeper wisdom" is being espoused all the time. We are AS susceptible, if not more so, than the world is to all sorts of fads and crazes and "theological bandwagons" which race through the evangelical world, like a tornado, leaving chaos and confusion in their path.

Take, for example, the whole "Prayer of Jabez" thing which took much of the church by storm a few years back. If ever there was an example of an applicational mountain being made out of an exegetical molehill, this is it. All of the sudden, this obscure verse, this one sentence prayer, in the middle of an extended genealogy and thus with very little context to help us understand how best to interpret it - all of the sudden the evangelical world is acting like this is some great new discovery, the next big thing - and books and video series and study guides and "prayer of Jabez" conferences and wrist bands and pajamas start appearing on every street corner and in every town. And, as a consequence, a whole "God as my personal genie" theology gets built up around this thing.

Meanwhile, in Matthew 6:9-13, a passage which clearly IS meant to be a model prayer - because Jesus says so - a passage which has plenty of context and great deal more content to it - that passage is virtually ignored by the church. Now, thankfully, I notice that a book has come out very deliberately titled "The Prayer of Jesus" - the author obviously wanting to make a point. But I will be greatly surprised if it gets anything like the attention of "the Prayer of Jabez".

But do you see my point? We are very much like the people in Paul's day, whom Luke described in Acts 17:21 like this, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." That was true of the Athenians, it was true of the Corinthians and it is, I believe, a true description of the church in our own day.

So, because we are so given to new things and crazes and fads and bandwagons, we need to hear Paul's warning again - "Do not deceive yourselves". And, with it, we need to hear again the ANTIDOTE - "*become a fool, that you may become wise*". We need to hear again Paul's call to come back to the truth we have *received* - which for us is a call back to the Scriptures and to the central truth of the Scriptures - the person of Jesus Christ - his, life, death, and resurrection. That is to be our reference point.

Whenever a new idea comes along, whenever some teacher stands up in the church and starts proclaiming some great new discovery that is some "secret"

not previously known, some insight not previously proclaimed "key" which will unlock or unleash an avalanche of power or favor or blessing - whenever that happens we need to make sure to follow Paul's advice to "become a fool" - to go back to the seemingly simple, the seemingly foolish truth of Christ and him crucified and use that as the measuring rod for all such things that clamor for our attention and allegiance.

And realize, of course, that to do such a thing requires humility, doesn't it? It would have required a lot of humility for those leaders in Paul's day, and for those following them, to admit that they had gotten off track, that they had departed from the way that Paul had shown them. It would have been humbling to go back and embrace again a truth that they had left behind, that they had once regarded as too simple or elementary or unsophisticated. And it is no different for God's people today. To abandon the wisdom of the world and come back to the pure Gospel is not an easy thing to do. It is a humbling thing to admit that you have lost your way, that you were misguided, that you were just plain wrong. Yes, it's humbling, *but it's healthy*. And it is the only way back. I look back on my own life and there are numerous occasions where I have had to do this very thing - where I have gotten off track, lost sight of the Cross, embraced some worldly foolishness, and had to be humbled and brought back.

Do not deceive yourselves. Become a fool.

The second command/warning that results from Paul's partial summation of what he has been saying thus far comes in verse 21, "So, then, no more boasting about men." Now, just as before, we understand what Paul is saying here from both its immediate and wider context. Most immediately, the command not to boast in men is applied to those Corinthians who were rallying around the various teachers that had arisen amongs them, including the ones who are building with inferior materials.

But looking at a little bit wider context we see that Paul also has in mind here those factions that he has already addressed several times in this letter - the personality cults that have formed around himself, and Peter and Apollos. Paul wants them to stop "boasting" - and by that he means placing their ultimate confidence - in any men, himself included, and instead reserve their boasting for the one who deserves it - Christ.

The explicit reason which Paul gives for this command, which then also serves as a kind of antidote to boasting, is the very simple statement that "all things are theirs". Now that statement, in itself, is a fairly dense one and needs a little bit of unpacking if we are to appreciate the full significance of it.

When Paul says "all things are yours" he is promoting a principle with the intent of showing how ridiculous and short-sighted their divisions and rallying around certain personalities really are AND, at the same time, by offering this principle

he is providing something which might serve as an ANTIDOTE to similar divisions in the future. So let's unpack this short phrase a little bit.

For starters, when Paul says, "all things are yours" he wants them to see how ridiculously short sighted their little party factions were. Forget for the moment that some of their divisions would have occurred over legitimate leaders and some of it may have been over other leaders who were leading them down alternative paths away from the Cross - in either case, Paul's point still retains its impact when you realize that by narrowing their field of vision to one leader who had the one perspective against which all other perspectives were measured - by doing that they were, among other things, impoverishing themselves. Why? Because no one Christian leader has cornered the market on God's truth.

Even further, God builds up his church, as we have seen, through a team effort, and therefore to narrowly cut oneself off from other legitimate teachers, by only aligning oneself with Paul or Peter or Apollos, would be like going to this great banquet, with 600 different choices and you confine yourself to this little section on the end which consists of only appetizers - completely ignoring the main course, vegetables, and desserts, etc.

Second, not only does Paul want them to see the way they are impoverishing themselves by their divisions but he also, by espousing this principle, wants them to see the way forward - the way to move beyond their divisions and back toward a greater unity among the believers in that place. That is, if they will begin to *act* on this principle, then they will find greater unity - for at least two reasons:

First, for those who are being swayed by the misguided teachers and being led away from a Cross-centered theology - if those people can be persuaded to value, once again, the Apostle Paul then they would be led to consider again the things that Paul first taught them. And in doing THAT, they would be able to see how and where their current teachers had gotten off track. The result would be greater unity in the church.

Second, for those who NOT being swayed by misguided teaching but who were simply identifying themselves exclusively with the teachings of legitimate teachers like Paul or Apollos or Peter - for those people, to act on the principle that "all things were theirs" would mean that they would learn to value what Paul AND Peter AND Apollos were saying, appreciating the differing gifts and emphases of each, and thus having a much richer and deeper and more unified Christian experience as a result.

Of course, the significance of this should not be lost on the church today. We need to learn that "the church" is a lot bigger than we tend to think it is. You and I can learn a lot from more people than we probably are at the moment, if only we would widen our circle a little bit to include the "Apollos" and the "Peters" that we have previously excluded from our list of approved teachers. Of course, this is

not to swing the gate wide open and say that "everybody has something valuable to say" - that's not true. *As we saw last week, not all who build, build well.* Some build poorly and with wrong intentions. We need to be discerning, to be sure, but we also need to remember that God is God.

About 12 years ago, I was at a point in my ministry where I was tired and frustrated and perhaps a little jaded. And I remember going to this conference - not because I wanted to but because I was expected to. And, to be quite honest, I was *dreading* the experience because in getting information about the conference, I had gotten some details about the main speaker, and had already "sized him up" as one who was outside my tradition, who would have very little to say that would be of any real help and was probably going to just tell a lot of funny stories, with little substance, and we would all go home, none the wiser. So I went, reluctantly, to this conference, sat down on the very last row and prepared myself for the worst.

Then God showed up, and he broke me in half And for the next two days, I sat listening to this speaker, hanging on his every word, while God did open heart surgery on a very needy patient. And the church got a little more unified that weekend, as this stranger became a beloved brother. And of the many things I learned over that weekend, one of them was this: "all things are yours" - I learned something of my own poverty, a consequence of my own, self-imposed theological exile, and which caused me to settle for so little, when God was offering so much.

Which leads to the last thing I want you to see here, and I don't really have the time to develop this as it probably ought to be. But do you see how broad and expansive Paul's statement is in verses 21 and 22?

*....All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God..*

Can you feel the breadth of that statement - this sort of "linguistic Grand Canyon" yawning before you? This whole "shooting match" is God's, who has bequeathed it to his Son, who has made it our inheritance. The five things mentioned - the world, life, death, the present and the future - are representative of, as Carson says, "the fundamental human tyrannies that so enslave us" - and yet all of these things that might enslave us are shown to be under the providential hand of a sovereign God, who broke the power of all such tyrannies through the broken body of his Son on the Cross, and who lays all these things before us now.

Can you see the life affirming, world affirming reality that is presented to us in these verses? In saying these things, Paul has moved on past the sort of "us against them" mentality that was poisoning the church and causing such division - he has gone way beyond that and is here espousing a basic life orientation. As

God's people we are to be life affirming, world affirming sort of people. We are to be known, not simply by what we deny - not via negativa - but by what we embrace.

Are we to be distinct from the world? Yes, we are "not of the world" and YET we are to be most definitely IN the world.. We are not to have this essentially negative, life-denying, suffocating, fortress-like, big-bad-wolf mentality about the world but rather one that is distinctive by what we embrace, as well as what we deny. We are to engage with the world - all things are ours - and reject that which is false - surely, but at the same time we are to devote just as much energy and creativity to embracing that which is true and good and right and lovely and which speaks of the wonder and beauty and the truth and the majesty of our Creator God.

Again, Paul wants them to take a step back here, and to see their petty divisions as an expression of a mentality that is altogether too limited, and which is impoverishing them as a community of God's people. A mentality that was all about saying what they WEREN'T and what they DIDN'T believe and what WASN'T going to be happening, and which was essentially disdainful of life and the world.

So, at the end of the day, Paul is calling them to practice and hold two things in tension with one another. On the one hand, they are not to deceive themselves - they are to be discerning and hold ruthlessly to the truths they had first received and measure all things by that. At the same time, they were not to boast in men and remember that all things are theirs - that is, in the exercising of discernment, they are not to pursue a path that is narrow and life-denying but rather one which shows an appreciation of the amazing generosity of a God who has, in Christ, given us all things, and as such we are to have an expansive vision and we must strive to embrace and benefit from as much as we can of what God has given to us, and to not prematurely or artificially limit that in any way.

How you individually apply these verses will depend on where you are. Some of you will need to spend more time on the "do not deceive yourself" end of that equation and learn to be more discerning. Others will need to spend more time on the "do not boast in men for all things are yours" end of the spectrum and learn to widen the circle which is starving your soul and cutting off your air.

Which of these most applies to you, God will make plain. And we should pray to that end so that *divisions* will be healed and *unity* promoted.

And God will be praised.

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