

## **The Pitfalls of Self-Deception**

### **1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5**

#### **Introduction:**

Open your bibles with me to the book of 1 Corinthians. Our text is found in chapter 3 verses 18-4:5.

In these 11 verses Paul begins wrapping up the argument he began back in 1:18 when he began to reveal how the word of the cross is foolishness to the world, but is the true wisdom of God and how the wisdom of the world, when seen from God's perspective, is the epitome of foolishness.

Let's walk through the text together and then make some observations with a view towards application.

#### **Exegesis:**

Verses 18 contains two imperatives or commands. One is to not deceive yourself by thinking yourself wise, because the wisdom of the world is really foolishness. This is in consonance with Proverbs 3:7 which says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil."

To become truly wise, and here's the second command, you must become foolish, at least in the eyes of the world. That's the only way to be truly wise.

In verses 19-20 Paul explains the reason you should not deceive yourself with the wisdom of the world. He gives us a divine declaration saying, "For the wisdom of the world is foolishness before God." This is a straight forward statement of truth from God's point of view.

In the second part of verse 19 he gives the first of two quotations from the Old Testament, and this one is from Job 5:13. Incidentally, this is the only place in the New Testament the book of Job is quoted.

Contextually, Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, sees himself as being wise and is basically preaching at Job as to why he is suffering. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, Job's three friends, were sure Job was suffering because he was a terrible sinner. What the reader of Job knows, however, is that Job is not suffering because of anything he has done, but rather God is allowing him to be tested.

But Eliphaz is somewhat self-righteous and is saying, and I summarize, "If it was me, if I were suffering like you, I would pray about it, taking my case to God." And then he goes on to spout off some things he knows to be true about God. Among them is the fact that God "Captures the wise by their own shrewdness, and the advice of the cunning is quickly thwarted." What becomes obvious is that there is much Eliphaz does not know about God and the way He works.

Interestingly, if you read to end of the book, you find that God is angry with Eliphaz and Job's two other friends, because of what they have said to him about his standing before God. In effect, He has caught them in their own shrewdness. And it is only when they offer sacrifices and Job prays for them that God turns His wrath from them. So this true statement about God, ironically proves true in the life of Eliphaz.

But the point is that God causes the worldly wise to fall into their own traps. Their so-called wisdom ends up working against them. That's the language being used in Job, it's the language of a hunter who has set a trap, but instead of snaring their prey, they fall into it themselves. This is what happens to those who think themselves wise as they seek to ignore the wisdom of God. The supposed intelligence of the wicked proves to be their undoing. He allows their own plans to reveal the foolish nature of worldly wisdom, and in His divine providence brings their plans to nothing.

But then, in verse 20 Paul quotes Psalm 94:1, which says, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless."

The word translated as "Know" here, in the original language, means to know things as they truly are. It means that this is not God's opinion. God does not have opinions, He has declarations. What He says is true, not only because He says it, which should be enough, but because He is omniscient and knows all things. While we may not always understand it, we are called upon to accept it by faith. Incidentally, it always proves true. Again, the Proverbs speak to this. Proverbs 30:5 says, "Every word of God proves true; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him."

God thoroughly knows the inner thoughts of every person and nothing outside of God's plan will ever stand the test of time. It will ultimately be revealed for the foolishness that it is. One day, everything will be revealed for what it truly is and all who have ever lived will be forced to come to terms with the truth that there is no wisdom outside of God.

But, as one scholar notes, this word is also often used in the sense of God ordaining things. This means that not only does God truly know that the thoughts of the worldly wise will come to nothing, He foreordains it. What God foreordains cannot be thwarted.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of verse 21, he says, "So then..." or, in light of what God does to the so called wisdom of the world, stop putting your focus on men. Since you know the outcome of trusting in the wisdom of the world, it is really foolish to trust in the wisdom of men over the wisdom of God.

Beginning in the second half of verse 20 through verse 23, he pivots off what he has just said, and comes back to the matter at hand, namely the division which exists among them, caused by their allegiance to human leaders.

He's saying that instead of you belonging to this group or that group, headed by human leaders, because they are servants of Christ, called to serve the church, **they** belong to **you**. In fact, all things belong to you and God has given you all things for your benefit, for His glory and for the expansion of His kingdom.

So, in addition to human leaders, the created cosmos, life or death, things present or things in the future, all these things belong to you and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

When He says Christ belongs to God, he's not diminishing the divinity of Christ, or saying that Jesus is in anyway less than God the Father. He's not talking about the nature of Christ here,

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. I Corinthians, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Pg. 96

we'll discuss the trinity in chapter 11. The thrust of this passage is to show how all things are ours because we are connected to God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son.

The logic is this, don't put your trust in men and thereby settle for less than God has for you. For you to confine your Christian Walk to one Christian leader is to fail to see the bigger picture of what is available to you in Christ. Because you belong to God the Son and through Him are now in right standing with God the Father, everything, all the servants of God, are given for your benefit. In fact, everything in creation, or in life, or even in death, things that exist and even things to come, they are yours because you are His.

Because you belong to Christ, and He's made all things available to you, he'll say in 4:1-2, you need to see His servants for who they are. They are stewards of the mysteries of God.

This is the tension wherein Christian leaders must be held; on one hand they are servants of Christ among you. They are not overlords, CEOs or titans of industry, as if the church were merely a business. They are servants. The Greek word here literally means "attendant." In classical Greek, it was used to make reference to a servant whose purpose was to accomplish the will of his master. In this case, Paul is saying that he, Apollos and Peter were simple servants of Christ, there to do the will of God.

On the other hand, they are also stewards of the mysteries of God. A steward, as we know, is someone who attends to that which belongs to another, and is thereby accountable to that person. In this case, they steward that which God has entrusted to them, namely the mysteries of God. This "mystery" God's plan of salvation through a crucified Savior, a truth long hidden from the mind of man, but now being revealed through the preaching of the gospel.

He's saying that while they are not to be idolized or venerated, because they are servants, the fact that they are God's servants is no light matter. In fact, it is so serious of a matter, that God is going to hold them accountable. Verse 2 says a steward is required, by God, to be trustworthy, or to faithfully manage what God has placed under their administration.

To emphasize this truth, in verses 3-5, he tells the Corinthians that what they think of him, or what any human court may say about him, or even what he thinks about himself is of little consequence because at the end of the day it is God who will judge us.

On that great and fateful day God will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's heart, then, on that day, each man will receive his judgment from God.

It's a lot to take in, but there are several things here for us to consider as we seek to apply the teaching of this text to our lives. Allow me to suggest just four.

### **Application:**

#### **1. The Danger of Self-Deception – Thinking something about yourself that is not true**

Many in the church at Corinth saw themselves as something they were not. Assessing themselves, and their leaders by the standards of the world rather than by God's standards had led them to believe something about themselves that was not true, namely that they were really

wise. And it was not bad enough that they thought something of themselves that was not true, they were organizing and operating the church based on these false assessments.

But they had missed the point, the point Paul makes over and over again in these first 4 chapters, that what the world sees as foolishness, namely the word of the cross, God defines as true wisdom. To be in Christ is to be different from the world, but they were seeing themselves, and running the church like the world. But they had convinced themselves that they could do God's work, man's way. They were deceiving themselves.

The idea of deception is one woven through the pages of scripture, so self-deception should come as no surprise to us. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that the human heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things. That means there is nothing more deceitful than the human heart. The prophet Obadiah chided the people of his day, assuring them that their proud hearts had deceived them. And the apostle John, in his first epistle, tells us that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

There was a day, in a more contemplative time, when the siren sounds of the television and internet were not there to enchant us, that Christians gave more thought to self-deception. A time when Christians lived with the cognizant realization that although they had been born again, they were still living in a fleshly body and inescapably influenced by their deceitful heart. And it was this awareness that caused them to regularly look at themselves in the mirror and ask if what they thought about themselves was really true.

Some years ago, the comedian Jeff Foxworthy made a fortune with the phrase, "You might be a redneck." He said things like, "If you've ever made change in the church offering plate, you might be a redneck."

To that I'd add, "If it's never occurred to you that you might be deceiving yourself, you might be a victim of self-deception." Remember, de-nile is not just a river in Africa.

Many Christians today suffer from self-deception on both ends of the spectrum. On one end they can think too little of themselves. This causes them to see themselves as less than they are in Christ. The enemy wants this and works hard to convince you of this. He wants Christians to feel so inadequate and so ill equipped that they are paralyzed by fear and self-doubt and thus become useless in the kingdom of God. Or he entices them to convince themselves that because they are inadequate for whatever God has called them to do, that the best thing they could do for all concerned is nothing. This is self-deception.

On the other hand, there are those who think too highly of themselves. This causes people to become proud and self-reliant and sets them up for a fall. And if you don't think this can happen to Christians, you need to go back and see what Jesus says to the church at Laodicea in Revelation chapter 3. In verse 17 Jesus says, "Because you say, I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing, and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked..." Clearly, they thought something of themselves that was not true. They saw themselves as being spiritually accomplished, but Jesus calls them wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked.

The danger of self-deception is not only living a lie, but suffering the consequences of that lie.

In Corinth, the ways of the world were more important to these Christians than the ways of God. They were running the church as if it were any other civic or political organization. They were politicizing the church, if you will, and it was causing division, grieving the Holy Spirit, and hurting the church's witness to the lost world around them.

The takeaway for you and me is to not assess ourselves and our church according to the standards of the world, but rather according to the standards of God's word. Remembering that God's word is a revelation of Himself to us, when we read it, it not only shows us who God is, but in light of Who He is, we can clearly see what we really are.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Don't be blinded by the false wisdom of the world, allow the word of God to open your eyes and show you the truth about yourself. Stop evaluating yourself and others by the world's standards. That's not God's standard and in the end, His standard is all that matters. Everything you do and become will flow from this true understanding of who you are. How you see yourself impacts your humility, or lack thereof. It impacts the way you treat others. It informs the way you live, serve and love. It all comes back to seeing yourself from the perspective of God's wisdom and not being self-deceived.

But there is a second thing here to which I would call your attention...

## **2. Selling your birthright for a bowl of stew –**

In Genesis 25 we have the story of twins Jacob and Esau. But never were two twins more opposite. Esau, who had come out of the womb first, was a rugged man, a hunter, while Jacob was more of a tent-dweller, we might say a momma's boy. One day, as you may recall, Jacob was in the kitchen cooking a stew, and Esau came in from the field and was famished, that's what the Hebrew says. And he asked his brother for a bowl of the stew. But Jacob, who was a trickster, said, first sell me your birthright. To which Esau said, "Behold I am about to die so what use then is the birthright to me?" So, he sold it to his brother for a bowl of stew.

Of course, later, when his father was dying, he regretted the foolishness of that decision, but it was too late. The double portion which had been his because he was born first, went to his younger brother. He sold something extremely valuable for that which was practically worthless. He had not properly assessed the true value of things.

This is what was going on in Corinth. Their fascination with their human leaders was causing them to become myopic, they could not see the forest for the trees. Instead of seeing all God had for them, all the things they could learn from the different teachers God had sent to them, they were squabbling over this one or that one. They were missing out on God's greatest blessings, and all for the ways of the world.

To this Paul says, and I paraphrase "STOP IT." Verse 21 says, "So let no one boast in men, for all things belong to you."

These Christians had chosen to live in a small corner of God's gracious provision, tenaciously and contentiously holding on to a small piece of God's grace, when the whole of God's creation was their benefit. By clinging to their human leaders and the limited temporal things they could offer, they were missing out on God's richest blessings, blessings that could only come to those who walked in the Spirit, assessed things spiritually and kept their focus on Jesus instead of on His servants.

Many Christians today are selling their birthright for a bowl of stew. The things this world offers are the bowl of stew. They satisfy our fleshly appetites and give us the temporal sensation of fullness, but in the end they are just that, temporal and they have no lasting value. But how many Christians are living according to the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of God? How many are passing up all the glorious riches they could be laying up in heaven, all the blessings that come from obedience, all the joy that accompanies walking in right fellowship with God, for things that cannot satisfy? But all things are ours in Christ.

This resonates with Romans 8:28 which says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose."

The things we are offered in Christ, are things no one can take from us. The peace that passes understanding, the strength to live as overcomers in this world, the power to forgive even as we have been forgiven, the joy that comes from laying our lives down for others, even as Jesus laid down His life for us and what about the fellowship we have with God Himself as we surrender ourselves to Him and allow Him to live His life through us?

And yet, so many Christians have opted instead for things that have no eternal value. They've bought into the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of God, and it will not end well for them.

The call here is to make sure we are not selling our birthright, and all the inheritance that accompanies it, for that which cannot truly satisfy.

But notice a third thing here, the reason all things are ours, is because we belong to Jesus.

### **3. Living with a biblical understanding of Stewardship –**

If it seems like the topic of stewardship keeps coming up, it's because, it is central to Paul's understanding of it means to follow Christ.

The idea that one can compartmentalize their Christian life and somehow separate it from their secular life, is a concept foreign to the New Testament. For Paul, to be saved, or born again, or regenerated, was to die to self and find our existence in Christ Jesus. In short: to belong to Jesus. A biblical view of Christianity is that of absolute and total surrender, holding nothing back. It means not only that I belong to Jesus, but that everything I "Have" belongs to Him and He has entrusted it to me. I am the owner of nothing and the steward of everything. While we may not have arrived to the point of giving it all to Jesus, that is the goal for every Christian, it's what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ. Any other definition of stewardship is not to be found in scripture.

Now, in a materialistic world like ours, particularly in a country that is built on materialism as ours is, this is not really a popular view. To many modern day Christians, when you mention stewardship, you're talking about money. And while money is certainly a part of stewardship, it's just that: a part. Authentic stewardship encompasses the entirety of our being, from our thoughts, our talents, our time, our families, our friends, our work, our hobbies and our finances. We are called to leverage everything at our disposal for the glory of God and the expansion of His kingdom.

This is the foundational understanding of stewardship here in 4:1-2. In this case Paul is talking about being a steward of the mysteries of God.

But it's in verse 2 where we find our takeaway. Here the apostle says that it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. That means, that they can be trusted with what God has entrusted to them.

Understanding that stewardship encompasses more than money, you might ask, "Why then do many pastors and preachers use money as an example of stewardship?" Because Jesus does. Jesus talks about money more than He talks about Heaven and Hell combined, and He does so because He knows the heart of man. He knows what motivates humanity. And He knows that the wisdom of the world is really foolishness.

In Luke Chapter 12, Jesus tells the story about this. He says, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive and he began reasoning to himself, what shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops? And he said, this is what I will do; I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods, and I will say to my soul, Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, you fool, this very night your soul is required of you, and now who will own what you have prepared. So is the man who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Jesus is calling on His followers to see things differently than the fool in this story. Yes, they live in a world where material things and the money that buys those things are a necessity, but they are not to be driven by those things, as if they had no heavenly Father. Christians assess things spiritually and see the foolishness of human wisdom. They have bought into divine wisdom. They understand that what God requires of His servants is not success, at least not as the world envisions it. He's not concerned with whether we are rich or poor, what He requires is for stewards to be trustworthy. He wants to be able to trust us with the things we've been given because one day we will be called to give an account to Him for what we have done with that which was His.

Paul understood that he would be accountable to God for how he handled that which God had entrusted to him, which included the preaching of the word of the cross and the way the church was run.

And he uses this truth, that God will judge us, to affirm another great truth, namely that what others think of us matters little, what we think of ourselves is not all that important, because at the end of the day the only thing that really matters, is what God knows about us.

And that brings us to our final observation here, where Paul talks about the judgment of God and finding our identity in Christ.

#### **4. Finding our Identity in Christ –**

My wife and I have been watching a television program from the late 80's and early 90's called "The Wonder Years." It's about the journey of a boy through Junior High and into High school. Among other things, the show accentuates the truth that in High School and Jr. High, we tended to think too much about how others viewed us. We were commenting to one another that if we could go back to Jr. High and High school now, knowing then what we know now, how things would have been different for us. I'm confident most people have thought about this at least once.

Imagine what little impact peer pressure would have on you if, when you were in Jr. High, you could have truly realized how little it mattered whether you were popular, or what your classmates thought of you. If you knew then what you know now, you'd have probably told a few people to take a long walk off a short pier. You certainly would not have allowed what others thought of you to impact you as you did when you were that age. And why not? Because you realize how worthless those opinions were going to be in the long run.

Paul addresses the Corinthians in that same vein. He is telling them that what they think about him, whether they like another apostle more than they like him, really doesn't matter. It does not even matter to him what anybody thinks of him, even his own opinion of himself is rather meaningless. Why? Because the only thing that matters is what God knows about Him.

So, he says, don't go around acting like your opinion about me or anyone else for that matter is of any consequence, it is not. Just wait till the day that we stand before Jesus and all hidden things will be brought to the light. In other words, the truth about each person will be known.

The idea is not that we should be jerks for Jesus, telling people that it does not matter what they think of us so we can act however we want. No, the idea is that if we concern ourselves with what God knows about us, i.e. we walk before Him in the integrity of our hearts, what others think about us will take care of itself. We really only need concern ourselves with what God knows about us, after all He knows our hearts.

What a good word for you and me this morning. Each of us, because we are humans and live in a world with other humans, are constantly tempted to care what others think of us. By nature, we want to be accepted, we want to be valued, to be appreciated for who we are and what we can do. All of us, whether we are introverts or extroverts, want the approval of others.

And many people do things they should not do to gain that approval. Others get angry and bitter when they fail to receive it. And still others become disconnected and disenchanted when they fail to get the human recognition they once desired.

But Paul says, and I paraphrase, "I'm so over that..." I like that. I like that Paul is focused entirely on what God knows of Him instead of what other humans think of him. That gave him a freedom that many Christians have yet to know.



Let me suggest a little saying that you might want to write down. If you don't get it written down, we'll have it on the website tomorrow. Tell yourself this, "I find my worth in Christ alone, who not only knows the truth about me, but loves me in spite of it and gave His life for me. I refuse to go on that emotional rollercoaster of allowing what others think of me to define me. They don't know me like Jesus does and they cannot love me like He loves me. I am who Jesus says I am, not what others think I am. I live for the day I stand before Him and hear Him call my name and say, well done good and faithful servant. Till that day I'll keep my eyes focused on Who He is and my ears attentive to what He says. Nothing else really matters."

When you come to the point that you can truly say this, you'll find a peace the world cannot give you, a confidence like no other and a purpose for living. It's all about finding your identity, not in what others think about you, but in what God knows about you.

### **Conclusion:**

Far too many Christians are living spiritually impoverished lives. They are allowing the ever changing opinions of others to define them. Others have deceived themselves into believing things about themselves that are not true. They've assessed themselves according to the wisdom of the world, rather than seeing themselves as Jesus sees them.

This morning, God is calling us to abandon the wisdom of the world, and to find the peace and fulfillment that He alone can offer those who understand and accept the word of the cross, the gospel. It tells us that outside of Him there is no life, but in Him we have eternal life.

May God grant each of us ears to hear what He is saying to the church.

Pray with me.