

A Humble Attitude

The Point: Humility calls for faithfulness to Christ.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 3:18–4:7

1 Corinthians 3:18-22

Connection to the Point: Believers have no room for boasting because we belong to God.

Context. So far in Paul’s letter, he had been instructing the Corinthians in two major ways. First, he had been encouraging the Corinthians to forsake the parties that had formed in the church behind various teachers. They should not have been divisively lining up behind him, Apollos, Peter, or even Jesus. Instead, they were to be united with each other in one body and wholly devoted to Jesus. By growing closer to Jesus, individual believers would grow closer to one another. Second, Paul had also been contrasting the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. He concluded that the wisdom of God is always superior to the wisdom of the world. True wisdom is found by embracing Christ and His teachings. In the focal verses, Paul combined these two ideas by demonstrating that following any human leader instead of Christ is always a foolish decision. Additionally, the Corinthians choosing to divide themselves into factions instead of being united in Christ ultimately would not be profitable for anyone.

Wise in this age (v. 18). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul used the phrase “this age” as a contrast to the age to come when Christ will return and put all things right. For example, in 1 Corinthians 2:6 Paul wrote that the wisdom of this age and the rulers of this age “are coming to nothing.” Since God is the source of true wisdom, the phrase “wise in this age” is a contradiction in terms. Ideas and philosophies that are only of “this age” are ultimately foolish. In other words, the wisdom of this world is foolishness compared to the wisdom of the all-wise God who not only knows all things—but is the source of truth and wisdom.

Let him become a fool (v. 18). Paul was not advocating actual and eschatological foolishness. Instead, he was advocating being wise in the eyes of God—which will result in the world thinking that one is foolish. The converse is also true. Choosing to become wise in the eyes of the world will result in being foolish in the eyes of God. Choosing to become a fool in the eyes of the world will not result in eternal shame but in eternal joy with God in Christ.

It is written (v. 19). In this passage Paul quoted from two separate books in the Old Testament—Job and Psalms. Both of those books are classified as wisdom literature. Old Testament wisdom literature is meant to give God’s people God’s perspective on the activities of everyday life. The passage that Paul quoted from Job (5:13) are the words of Eliphaz, one of Job’s friends.

At the end of the book of Job, God declared Eliphaz to be incorrect in his assessment of Job’s situation. However, the fact that Eliphaz was ultimately incorrect does not mean that every word he spoke was incorrect. Instead, Eliphaz and Job’s other friends knew some correct facts about God but applied that knowledge unwisely.

The other quote is from Psalm 94:11. The theme of Psalm 94 is that God is a just judge—always correctly and accurately judging all the nations of the earth. “The wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s sight. The way to become truly wise is to become a ‘fool,’ which is to embrace the cross not only as the object of faith but as a value system, a way of thinking and behaving.”¹

Everything is yours (vv. 21,22). There is a great irony in all the talk of following one teacher or another in the factions that had formed in the Corinthian church. While different groups of individuals lined up behind individual teachers such as Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter), they did not seem to realize that they did not need to choose between these three men. In fact, even those who claimed to follow Christ were missing the big picture. All truth is God's truth, and therefore everything that is true belongs to those who are in Christ—including the teachings of each of these men. There is no teaching that belongs to Paul that does not belong to Christ. Equally, there is no teaching that belongs to Cephas or Apollos that does not belong to Christ. Any and all truth from the teachings of any of these Christian teachers is actually truth that belongs to God in Christ, which in turn belongs to those who are in Christ—including the Corinthian believers in all their imperfections.

Christ belongs to God (v. 23). When someone is in Christ, they are in God, because Christ is God. Instead of belonging to Paul, Apollos, or Cephas as some of the Corinthians were concerned about (1:12), Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to know that he, Apollos, and Cephas all belong to them as members of the body of Christ. Belonging to Christ means belonging to God Himself. This phrase and concept have clear Trinitarian implications. To be in Christ is to be in God. To be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is to be indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). The words "Christ belongs to God" provides the theological basis for the truths taught in the previous verse, which in turn rebuke and renounce the attitudes seen at the beginning of the letter, where Paul noted the Corinthians were forming factions behind human teachers rather than all submitting themselves to God in Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Connection to the Point: Stay faithful to the work God has given you.

Servants of Christ (v. 1). Paul returned to the same kind of language he used earlier in 1 Corinthians when he wrote about Apollos, Cephas, and himself. Once again, Paul referred to all three of these men as "servants." In this passage, however, Paul used a different Greek word for "servants" (*huperetes*) than he had used earlier in 3:5 (*diakonos*). *Diakonos* is closely associated with the idea of service to a master. *Huperetes* is closer to the concept of an attendant, assistant, or helper. It refers to people who carry out the will of a person who wields authority and power. In this case, Christ is the Master of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. They are faithful servants who sought to fulfill their Master's will completely.

Managers of the mysteries of God (v. 1). Christians manage "the mysteries of God" by administering what God has given them. Elsewhere Paul called himself and all Christians "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). When coupled with the previous statement about being servants (or attendants/helpers) of Christ, the image of a manager or steward here is similar to the idea of being an ambassador in 2 Corinthians. An ambassador is an individual who is sent to a foreign place to live among people of a different language and/or culture in order to represent someone or something greater than himself. An ambassador does not have the right to create messages or alter the message that he is given. Instead, his task is to faithfully convey that message.

In the context of 1 Corinthians, "the mysteries of God" are the truths of Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor. 2:1-2,7). The mysteries of God are things that were once hidden but are now revealed (Col. 1:25-27). The New Testament reveals the mystery of the crucified Messiah that was hidden in the Old Testament. The task of those who are managers of these mysteries is to manage these truths in such a way that people will understand the message of the gospel God is revealing to them. Managers are to be faithful to their Master, Jesus Christ.

Of little importance to me that I should be judged (v. 3). Knowing that he would answer to God alone for his words and actions, Paul was not concerned as to whether people judged his ministry to be wise or foolish. However, Paul was not saying that ministries cannot or should not be evaluated for their content and their actions. In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul reported how he evaluated Peter's actions when Peter was being hypocritical by refusing to eat with Gentile believers. Paul was willing to evaluate actions and ideas as being either in line

with or out of line with the gospel. He was not, however, willing to judge the ultimate and final effectiveness of the efforts of ministers. That judgment belongs to God alone.

I don't even judge myself (v. 3). Paul did not ultimately have confidence in himself or in his work of ministry. Instead, Paul had God-confidence. The apostle didn't place his certainty in his self-evaluation of his own life and ministry. Instead, he entrusted himself to the Lord, and he was confident that the Lord would judge him to be found faithful. After all, Apollos, Peter, and even Paul himself were all merely stewards of the gospel of God's grace. God's grace comes from God, and He will be the final Judge of all things related to it. Paul was saying that a comprehensive and fully objective evaluation of one's ministry and that of others should be left to the Lord.

Bring to light . . . reveal the intentions (v. 5). When someone switches on a light in a dark room, the contents of the room are revealed to those who are looking. The images of light and darkness are common in the New Testament. Jesus said that He is "the light of the world" and that following Him gives people "the light of life" (John 8:12). The apostle John wrote that when we walk in this light, we have fellowship with one another as those who have been cleansed of our sins by the work of Jesus (1 John 1:7). At the end of the age, God will judge "what people have kept secret" (Rom. 2:16) so we should be slow to pronounce judgment against others.

Praise will come to each one from God (v. 5). In the parable of the talents, the master said to the faithful servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Share your master's joy" (Matt. 25:23). God is the only One whose praise ultimately matters. The praise of people will come to nothing in the end, so we should neither fear people nor overly love their praise.

1 Corinthians 4:6-7

Connection to the Point: Follow the example of Paul in serving with humility.

Brothers and sisters (v. 6). The Corinthian church had many shortcomings. As a result, they needed and received rebuke, correction, instruction, and encouragement from the apostle Paul. But they were still part of the family of God and, therefore, they were Paul's brothers and sisters. While sin grieves the Holy Spirit, it does not cause someone to lose their salvation. Salvation, after all, is a gift from God, by grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph 2:8-9).

I have applied these things (v. 6). Paul was consistently willing to subject himself and his conduct to his own commands and teaching. He did not say, "Do what I say and not what I do." Instead, Paul said, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Paul was willing to put his life forward to be inspected by those whom he disciplined and taught. He was so confident in the gospel and its transforming work in his own life and teaching that he was willing to have them as subjects of inspection.

For your benefit (v. 6). Following the example and teaching of a godly teacher is not obedience merely for the sake of obedience itself. Instead, the benefit of the Corinthians following Paul's example and teaching was that they might truly understand the gospel and grow to maturity in the faith. After becoming recipients of the true gospel, the believers in Corinth were to speak the truth of the gospel to others so that their hearers might, in turn, repent and believe in the saving work of Christ.

Nothing beyond what is written (v. 6). God has revealed Himself in general revelation—in creation and in the human conscience. However, general revelation is subject to the final authority of God's special revelation as declared in the Bible. The Bible is the only perfect and authoritative standard for Christian faith and practice. By referring to "what is written," Paul was probably referring to the Old Testament. "If the Corinthians would live within the boundaries of Scripture, then they would not boast in men . . . This is the first occurrence of the

term ‘puffed up’ [CSB, “arrogant”], which sustains an important use throughout the letter (4:18; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). The root cause of most, if not all, of their problems was pride.”²

What makes you superior? (v. 7). Paul’s purpose was also that none of the Corinthian believers would “be arrogant, favoring one person over another” (v. 6). He asked three ironic and rhetorical questions meant to cause the Corinthian believers to be introspective and thereby lead them to discover the truth to which he was trying to guide them. The answer to this first question about superiority is “nothing.” Nothing made the Christians at Corinth superior to either one another in the various factions or to any other Christians outside of Corinth. A sense of superiority is always dangerous, both in churches and among individual believers. It is neither healthy nor helpful.

What do you have that you didn’t receive? (v. 7). The answer to this second rhetorical question is, once again, “nothing.” The Corinthian believers could not boast that they possessed anything good that they had not received as a gift from God. As Christians, we always relate to God as recipients of His great gifts and not as wage earners. The only wage that we have ever earned is death and judgment because of our sins (Rom. 6:23). All the good things that we have in life come to us as a result of God’s faithfulness (Jas. 1:17).

Why do you boast? (v. 7). The answer to this third and final question was that the Corinthian believers should not have been boasting at all. The theme of boasting goes back to 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, where Paul instructed the Corinthians to only boast in the Lord. The line of thinking here is similar to Romans 3:27-28 where Paul wrote that boasting is excluded because the only way someone can be justified before God is through faith and not by works. The inability to be justified by works of the law means that boasting about one’s position before God in Christ is both sinful and irrational.

1. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 110.
2. *Ibid.*, 119.