

Text: 1 Corinthians 4:6-17

Title: Humble Thinking

Truth: A superior attitude must be replaced by humility.

Date/Location: April 19, 2020 (and previously January 21, 2001) at FBC

Introduction

In our message the week before Resurrection Sunday, we examined 1 Cor. 4:1-5 where Paul commanded the Corinthians to regard him and the other apostles as servants and stewards. They were not orators or rhetoricians or full of worldly wisdom or dashing handsome. They were managers of God’s revelation, responsible to faithfully discharge their duties in proclaiming it and living as Christians.

In addition, the Corinthians were to let God do the evaluation of His servants instead of presuming to do so themselves—and that with the wrong rubric of worldly standards! This was the remedy to their false evaluation of the various servants of God as they (the Corinthians) split into factions. Only God’s evaluation really counts. Even Paul’s own self-evaluation, as good as it would have been, was insufficient.

Our present passage is sometimes explained as a defense of Paul’s apostleship. Although Paul does do that elsewhere to the Corinthians and Galatians, that is not the point in this passage. The point here has to do with how the believers regarded themselves with respect to the world and how different their self-estimation was compared to the truth that the apostle Paul was teaching them. In truth, Christians are treated as the lowest of the low—particularly outspoken missionaries and pastors.

I. Examine Several Parts of the Text, v. 6-13

I’ll take you through a few things that I studied in preparation for this message, and which I think are helpful to your understanding.

A. **The phrase “beyond what is written.”** This is meant to call the Corinthians’ attention once again to the authority of Scripture and remind them that their behavior needs to be in agreement with it. Not counting allusions or influences of OT truth on Paul’s words, Paul has woven six Old Testament citations together in this letter to explain to the Corinthians how they should be thinking. Consider the references in the following table:

1 Corinthians	Old Testament
1:19 For it is written...	Isaiah 29:14 “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

1:31 As it is written	Jer. 9:23, 24 “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”
1 Cor. 2:9 As it is written	Isaiah 64:4 “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which god has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them...
2:16	Isaiah 40:13 “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruction Him?”
3:19 it is written	Job 5 13 “He catches the wise in their own craftiness”
3:20	Ps 94:11 “The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

These words of old remind us of the truths around which Paul’s thoughts revolve:

- that the world’s wisdom is not at all impressive to God and in fact, the world’s wisdom will come to nothing;
- that boasting is not to be in self but in the Lord;
- that man cannot know on his own the things of God;
- and that the wise of the world are actually fools and will be caught in their own ‘wisdom.’

The people of the Corinthian church were all eaten up with the impressive things of their own age. But that mindset is not the mindset of a faithful believer.

B. The thick sarcasm of verses 8 and 10.

- You are already full!
- You are already rich!
- You reign as kings! I wish you did, and we with you.
- You are wise! We are fools for Christ.
- You are strong! We are weak.
- You are distinguished! We are dishonored.

These words drip with sarcasm, which uses sharp expressions and irony. In this case, the descriptions *full*, *rich*, *wise*, *strong*, etc. express the Corinthians’ self-estimation, but the facts are entirely the opposite. They are not full, not rich, not kings, not wise, not strong, and not distinguished. Paul wishes they were—so he could join them and avoid the trials he experiences. The reality for Christians is much the opposite. The world they admire looks down upon Christians, not up to them. They are thinking like the Laodicean church years later which boasted about its

wealth, yet Jesus evaluated them as poor, miserable, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17). They needed to repent. How far from the truth our own self-evaluation can be!

C. **The question “what do you have that you did not receive”?** The answer to this rhetorical question is: “Nothing.” In other words, the fact assertion is that all you have you were given by God. Life, health, cognition, riches, strength, the place of your birth, your family, everything was given to you. If your answer is, “No, I built that, and God had no part in it!” then your individualistic and self-sufficient approach to life has been exposed. Of course God commands us to work hard and produce and be prudent and so forth. But we are weak and unable without God’s provision. Without God, we don’t even exist! Without God’s mercy and grace, all of our efforts would fail miserably.

Consequently, Paul says in verse 7, there is no place for boasting. Don’t be like Nebuchadnezzar who said, “Look what I did!” (Daniel 4:30).

D. **The report of awful conditions endured by Paul** and his co-workers. Look at verses 9 and 11-13. Here is the catalog:

1. Appear as men condemned to death (in the Roman arena). The last prisoners brought in were the worst, the biggest “prize” for the audience, perhaps the most hated and reviled.
2. A spectacle to the world (humiliation). Christians are not elevated, generally, to places of prominence or influence. Sometimes God providentially arranges that, and we can be thankful whenever it is.
3. Hunger. The Lord Jesus was sometimes hungry.
4. Thirst. The Lord Jesus also sometimes thirsted. We aren’t better than he (John 15:20).
5. Poorly clothed. At times, God provided the minimal needed.
6. Beaten. Many times Paul suffered painful abuse.
7. Homeless. Just like the Son of Man, who had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20).
8. Working hard with their hands (1 Thess. 4:11). This was something that Paul demonstrated in his travels (Acts 20:34). We almost think nothing of this, or we think it is commendable. But to the lofty and cultured Roman, working with one’s hands was beneath their dignity. That was for slaves or common men, not for the refined in culture.
9. Reviled (but blessing in response). 1 Peter 2:23 says that Christ was reviled, but did not revile in return.
10. Persecuted (but enduring).
11. Defamed (but encouraging and exhorting).

12. Considered as filth and scum.

Two other portions of Scripture list some of Paul's travails (2 Cor. 6:4-5, 8-10, 11:23-28). In addition, Paul and the other gospel ministers were looked down upon as fools, weak, and dishonored (v. 10).

II. Putting the Parts Together, v. 6-13

- A. Paul has been speaking figuratively. The metaphors of farming and building now become direct speech (v. 6).
- B. Paul had been using himself and Apollos as examples, as object lessons to help them understand that they must not think like they are thinking. They are thinking "beyond what is written," outside of the boundaries of what is Biblically right. They focused on wisdom and were glorying in men rather than in God. They considered themselves grand and were divided into groups, one group puffed up for one minister and against another minister.
- C. Paul asks who, what and why questions in v. 7. In effect, he is asking where their superiority complex has come from. Each of them is no better than the others. Everything they have was given to them. Every spiritual gift they have is to serve God because God gave it to them. It is not an opportunity to exalt themselves. There was no place for boasting. The point: HUMILITY. Romans 12:3 strengthens this thought. Christians are to have a modest, low view of their own importance. To have a high view of yourself is sinful. This is balanced against a spirit of gratitude toward God. God has created you to serve Him and you are or can be redeemed from sin. This is a kind of lofty place, but it is a place of service. To have a high view of other people is also likewise wrong. Our boast and trust is not in man (Ps. 146:3-5, Is. 2:22, Jer. 17:5-6, Mat. 23:8-10).
- D. In verses 8-13 Paul uses the tool of sarcasm along with the truth of his own suffering to show the Corinthians how wrong they are. They had what could be seen as a "kingdom now" view of life where they are presently reigning with Christ. They have everything and have "arrived." But this view probably did not originate in faulty eschatology (like we have rampant today), but rather in pagan philosophy. The Cynic and Stoic philosophers would use language like "full" and "rich" and "king." Commentators Ciampa and Rosner write, "According to Epictetus, the true Cynic can say, 'Who, when he lays eyes upon me, does not feel that

he is seeing his king?"¹ This self-inflated view of worldly philosophy was kind of burned into the brains of the Corinthians and they adapted it to their "new Christian philosophy." They were "full of themselves" instead of being full of Christ.

- E. Their thinking has turned Christianity into a kind of prosperity theology. That might work for a short time, but as all false theologies, it would ultimately be unable to explain the reality of life that they would experience if they held fast to Christ. That reality was already experienced by Paul—a reality of deprivation, of humiliation, of being told he is a shame by a society that hates God, of persecution, of reviling.

III. Paul's Fatherly Care for the Corinthians, v. 14-17

- A. The role of father includes the job of discipline and training. As a good father, he doesn't want to put the children to utter shame, but he wants to warn them that their thinking is wrong. The warning indicates that they would be running into a difficulty in the near future if they didn't change their beliefs.
- B. Paul loved these young believers. They were fruit of the ministry that God gave to him. He was their "father" in the gospel. Many people might lay claim to being their Christian teachers, but only Paul was the one who brought them the gospel of Christ and cared for them as a father for his children (v. 15).
- C. Verse 17 issues a call for the believers to imitate Paul. It is Paul's manner of thinking and approach to life that he is asking them to imitate. As a good disciple-maker and disciple-teacher, Paul was a model for his "students." As Paul followed Christ, they were to follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1, Philippians 3:17).
- D. Paul had sent Timothy to do ministries in several places, and one of his jobs was to go back to Corinth and remind the believers of apostolic teaching and practice. Timothy has been dispatched to encourage the believers to think and live humbly, and to be ready to face difficulties like Paul did. Timothy was eminently qualified to do this.
- E. Notice that Paul was not treating the Corinthians differently than anyone else. They were not being singled out. Paul taught these doctrines everywhere in every church. Similar phrases indicating the consistency of Paul's teaching are found in 1 Cor. 7:17, 11:16, 14:33, 16:1. See also 2 Cor. 12:13.

¹ *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Ciampa and Rosner, p. 180.

Conclusion

If you are looking to be influential or to put Christianity on the map as a “player” in the world, you are going to find it to be very difficult. You have very little place at the table in politics, no place at the table in science, and none in culture. There is some place for you in law, but that is rapidly diminishing even in the West. Pushing your way in may allow you to have good influence in a small measure, but the truth is that those things are not our ultimate mission. We are told by God to make disciples and grow in grace, in and around our church ministries.

If on the other hand you think of Christianity as a way to prosperity—fullness, riches, kingship—then Paul tamps down your expectations by calling you to humility.

We should set our minds that we are not going to be popular, and our viewpoint will be reviled. That’s the default. If our faith is accepted by some, that will be wonderful.

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