

This morning, I am in the third week of a sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, which is a letter written by the Apostle Paul's to the church at Corinth. In Paul's day, Corinth was a part of the Roman Empire, a major port city on a narrow land bridge between Peloponnesus and mainland Greece. As a result, it was a significant economic and cultural hub, and a great place for a missionary like Paul to start a church, which we read about in Acts 18.

1 Corinthians is the first of two letters of Paul that we have addressed to the church in Corinth. He wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus, probably about 54-55 AD. In this letter, Paul addresses issues of divisions in the church, heretical teachings, sexual issues, idolatry issues, and issues in their worship gatherings. In the first four chapters, Paul is especially focused on confronting the divisions in the church and exposing the underlying pride and spiritual immaturity that is causing it. In chapters 3 & 4, which we are looking at this morning, Paul confronts their understanding of spiritual maturity and wisdom, exposing it as immaturity and foolishness. I believe it will be worth your listen and consideration as you evaluate your own wisdom and spiritual maturity. Let's read chapters 3 & 4:

*1 Corinthians 3:1 - 4:21 - Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. <sup>3</sup> You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? <sup>5</sup> What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. <sup>8</sup> The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. <sup>10</sup> By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. <sup>16</sup> Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup> If*

anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. <sup>18</sup> Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." <sup>21</sup> So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. <sup>NIV</sup> **1 Corinthians 4:1** So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. <sup>2</sup> Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. <sup>3</sup> I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. <sup>6</sup> Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. <sup>7</sup> For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? <sup>8</sup> Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings-- and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! <sup>9</sup> For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. <sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! <sup>11</sup> To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup> We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup> when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. <sup>14</sup> I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. <sup>15</sup> Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. <sup>16</sup> Therefore I urge you to imitate me. <sup>17</sup> For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. <sup>18</sup> Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup> But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what

power they have. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. <sup>21</sup> What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

In this letter, we see that the Corinthian church has many people who think that they are spiritual, wise, and mature. But Paul needs to correct them and let them know that they are not all that they think they are.

**1 Corinthians 3:1-3** - Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. <sup>3</sup> You are still worldly.

**1 Corinthians 3:18-19** - Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

Evidently, Paul believes that there is something off about the Corinthians' idea of what spiritual maturity looks like, and I think what he has to say will prove to be very instructive for us today. He points out two issues in particular:

### 1) They are seeking their own glory, not the glory of God

**1 Corinthians 3:3-4** - You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

The Corinthians are treating the church community as no different than the world, as an arena in which to advance their personal status. One of the reasons they think so highly of themselves is that **they are placing a good chunk of their spiritual identity and self-worth in the leader they follow** or the person who converted or baptized them. They are boasting that they are better than others because they follow Paul or Apollos or Cephas or Christ. We talked about this in the first week of the series, where Paul calls them out on this behavior and has to remind them that they are all one in Christ and that because they are saved by grace, not by their good works, there is no place for boasting. Their behavior comes from a place of pride; to repeat C.S. Lewis' quote on pride from Mere Christianity: "*Pride gets no pleasure out of having something; pride only gets pleasure in having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or*

*better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about.”*

The concern of the Corinthians is promoting their own status and displaying themselves as more spiritually mature or wise than other believers, but the result is that it is causing unnecessary and ungodly division, rivalry and quarreling in the church. Paul sees this as evidence that they are not as spiritual as they think they are. And so he says:

***1 Corinthians 3:21*** - *So then, no more boasting about men!*

***1 Corinthians 4:7*** - *For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*

In other words, you actually have nothing to boast in. **Everything good that you have is a gift from God.** Even your intelligence, your work ethic, your loving disposition, your oratory skill, your parenting skills – it is all a gift from God, not something you earned on your own. So how can you boast?

***Ephesians 2:8-9*** - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

***James 1:17*** – *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

**Be careful that you do not allow anything in your life to become something you boast in and put your pride in over and against another person.** That is what leads to unnecessary and ungodly division. You listen to good preachers? Praise God. You know your theology or apologetics? Wonderful. You have a discerning mind? The church needs that. You serve the poor and love your neighbor? That is great. But recognize that it is all a gift of God. So stop boasting and start praising God who gave you those gifts. Your boasting reveals that you have not truly taken to heart the gospel of salvation by grace, that your identity and self-worth are found not in your performance but in God’s love for you.

Paul, by contrast, sees himself as simply God’s servant, nothing more.

***1 Corinthians 3:5-9*** - *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.<sup>6</sup> I*

*planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. <sup>8</sup> The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

He says that he and Apollos are **servants** of God. They do the work God has given them to do, but only God can make their work fruitful. So He alone deserves the glory. He also says that they are **fellow workers** – not in competition, but complementing each other in service to the Lord. Instead of allowing the Corinthians to put him on a pedestal as a minister of God, he says that he is nothing more than a slave of God. In this way, he is following in the footsteps of Jesus:

***Philippians 2:3-11*** - *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The world says to do all you can to elevate your standing, to move up in the world. The way of the cross says to give and serve others.

***Mark 9:33-35*** - *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the **servant of all.**"*

To reach a place where you are willing to follow Jesus in becoming the servant of all – that is true spiritual maturity.

- 2) They are evaluating themselves by worldly standards of success, not God's standards

The Corinthians think they are blessed by God because of how well life is going:

*1 Corinthians 4:8 - Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings-- and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!*

In other words, because they seem to be wealthy and life is going well, they think it means that they are spiritually mature. **But Paul argues here that worldly wealth and success are not markers of spiritual maturity.** He does this by contrasting their situation with the predicament of Paul and the other apostles:

*1 Corinthians 4:9-14 - For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. <sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! <sup>11</sup> To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup> We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup> when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. <sup>14</sup> I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.*

Paul tells the Corinthians that the apostles are like men entering the arena to be fed to the lions. They are fools, weak, dishonored, hungry, thirsty, in rags, brutally treated, homeless, toiling away, blessing those who curse, enduring persecution. He compares himself to the scum of the earth – perikatharma – that which is removed by cleaning; and to refuse – peripsema – scrapings that are scrubbed off something, like the sole of a shoe.

What is his point? **If you are judging by the standards of this world, then clearly the Corinthian church is more spiritually mature than even Paul,** and are the ones who are blessed and favored by God.

*“These Corinthians are lucky. Already they enjoy forms that the apostles dare only hope for... The Messianic kingdom seems to have come to Corinth and these people have been given their thrones, while the apostles are placed with the servants... The apostles still struggle like gladiators in the arena, doomed to die and a spectacle, while the Corinthians lounge in the best seats and just applaud or even boo.” (Gaston Deluz, Companion, p. 46-7).*

But certainly this is not how Paul really sees it. In his pointed way, Paul is letting them know that **spiritual maturity is not measured by worldly means, but is measured by faithfulness to Jesus. The spiritually mature follow Jesus, and the way of Jesus is the way of the cross.** Spiritual maturity involves laying down your life for others, sacrificing yourself for the good of other people, being willing to suffer so that others might be saved and blessed. And that will often not look successful by the standards of the world. **And so, if the Corinthians do not resemble Jesus in this way, they need to be careful in evaluating themselves as spiritually mature.**

What are God's standards and expectations, according to Paul? **Faithfulness to God.**

*1 Corinthians 4:2 - Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*

Paul sees his job as being a faithful servant, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

*1 Corinthians 3:5-6 - What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.*

He is simply serving God; God is the one bringing fruitfulness from their labors. And in the end, he will let God be the judge of how successfully he lived, not the markers of worldly success.

*1 Corinthians 4:5 - Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

Why are the Corinthians not as spiritually mature or wise as they think they are? Because they are seeking their own glory instead of glorifying and serving God, and they are evaluating themselves by worldly standards of success and not by God's standards.

**So what are the implications for us today?**

1) Let God, not others (or even yourself) be the judge

*1 Corinthians 4:3-5 - I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

I don't care what you think of me. But I don't even care what I think of me. **I care what God thinks of me.** This is revolutionary. This is not high self-esteem or low self-esteem. This is God-esteem, allowing God's evaluation of us to be what informs our self-image.

So how does God see us? **We are so sinful that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save us. But we are so loved that He willingly died for us. This gives us humble confidence.** We know we are loved and valued and cared for, and yet it is not based on anything we have done or anything about us that can become cause for boasting. And so we don't need to go out seeking the approval of others, because we already have the approval of the one whose opinion matters most.

In a sermon on this subject by Tim Keller, he references an Arthur Miller play called *After the Fall*, where one of the characters says this:

*"You know, more and more I think that for many years I looked at life like a case at law, a series of proofs... When you're young you prove how brave you, or how smart you are, then what a good lover you are, later what a good husband or father how you are; later how wise, how powerful or whatever... but underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where – God knows what – I would be justified, or even condemned – a verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day – and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself – this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. Which, of course, is another way of saying – despair."*

What an insightful look into the human condition. This quote is a picture of what we do subconsciously all the time. We are trying to gain some kind of verdict, whether from others or from ourselves, that we are enough, that we are valuable, that we are lovable. But will we ever do enough to prove to others, or to ourselves, that we matter? And isn't there a better way to live than for the approval of others, or for our own approval?

The gospel declares that there is a better way. **In Jesus, we are sinful yet loved. We gain an identity of one who is beloved, but not in a way that causes us to take pride in ourselves and look down on others.** We are able to admit the worst about ourselves, knowing that God has seen it all and completely forgiven it and loved us anyways. **And then we go out to love and serve God and others,** not from a place of self-interest or trying to earn our self-worth, but from a heart that wants to love others as God in Christ has loved us.

That is what Paul knows the Corinthians need more than anything, to trust the gospel and gain their self-worth from God's love and grace, so that they would not need to boast and be arrogant towards one another.

We need to know God's standards and let Him be our judge instead of letting others – or ourselves – judge us by the standards of the world.

## 2) Build God's kingdom, not your own

*1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

The gospel is the foundation. There is no other firm surface on which to build a life or a church than the gospel. **But how will you build upon that foundation with your life?** If we are self-centered, then even if we were saved, all we spend our lives on will be burned up in the end. But if we use what God has given us to build up his kingdom, we will receive reward in the end. Remember what Jesus said:

*Matthew 6:19-21 - "Do not **store up** for yourselves **treasures** on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But **store up** for yourselves **treasures** in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Store up treasure in heaven, not on earth. By contrast, Paul tells them that those who are living for their own glory, even at the expense of the church, should be very concerned:

*1 Corinthians 3:16-17 - Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.*

How are you building? Are you spending your life building up God's kingdom in a way that will last forever? Or are you spending your time, money, and energy on yourself, without regard for the church or the kingdom of God, so that it will all be burned up in the end?

The Corinthian predicament makes me think of this passage:

*2 Corinthians 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

And then what are you to do with those riches? Enjoy them? Some see this passage as license for becoming rich. But in the context, Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to give to others in need out of their riches. We are enriched so that we might follow in the way of the cross by becoming poor so that others might become rich.

### 3) Find someone worthy of imitation

*1 Corinthians 4:15-16 - Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. <sup>16</sup> Therefore I urge you to imitate me.*

If you feel immature in your faith, look for someone worthy of imitation. Get plugged in and find your own Paul. And if you are older in the faith, do not be afraid to come alongside someone and help them learn how to live faithfully in the way of the cross.

Spiritual maturity and success is not measured the way the world measures it. It is not measured by numbers, wealth, or lack of problems. It is measured by faithfulness, by being willing to walk after Jesus in the way of the cross. Jesus, lead on.