



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians

Lesson 6, 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5
TEACHER

OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21, Human vs. divine wisdom

Lesson Outline

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5, No glory in man's wisdom

- 3:18-20 Let no one deceive himself
- 3:21-23 Let no one glory in men
- 4:1-5 Judging God's servants

An underlying message in all that Paul has written so far is that Christians are God's people. As such, they should not only act differently than does the world, but they should think differently. They should live by different values and by a different evaluation of what is truly important.

Paul had begun by pointing out division in the church expressed by having rival groups who claimed allegiance to various spiritual leaders. He then presented the gospel of Jesus crucified as the ultimate example of God's greater wisdom, a wisdom that was not appreciated by the ways of the world.

Earlier in chapter 3 he again mentioned the favorite personalities, but now returns to his assertion that worldly wisdom is deceptive and divisive, while godly wisdom is redemptive and unifying. If there is any doubt that Paul is still on the same theme, compare the verses below in which statements from chapter 1 find corresponding statements in chapter 3.

1:18-31	3:18-21a
²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, <i>are called.</i>	¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.
²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;	
^{20b} Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?	^{19a} For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.
¹⁹ For it is written: " <i>I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.</i> "	^{19b} For it is written, " <i>He catches the wise in their own craftiness</i> "; ²⁰ and again, " <i>The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.</i> "
³¹ that, as it is written, " <i>He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.</i> "	²¹ Therefore let no one glory in men.

DISCUSSION

1 Co 3:18-20, Let no one deceive himself

- 1. What simple and basic ideas that are central to the thought of these early chapters is highlighted in the quotations shown above from Isaiah 29, Jeremiah 9, Job 5 and Psalms 94?**

Several valid ideas could be suggested. But among them should be the basic and obvious message that since God's wisdom and ways are much better than the world's (or any man's), we should all unite as servants of the God who, in his infinite wisdom, sent His Son to die for our salvation.

- 2. What worldly wisdom ideas had been accepted as truth in Job's day as shown in his story? Would anyone following such wisdom have become a follower of Job after tragedy struck (verse 19; Job 5:13)?**

- Most thought that the righteous would be materially and physically blessed?
- Suffering was considered to be the direct result of personal sin.
- No one was following the suffering Job because by the world's standards, he must have been in the wrong.

- 3. In what specific area were the Corinthian Christians deceiving themselves? (Compare the imperative statements in verses 18 & 21. In ESV both begin, "let no one.")**

They were thinking that if they were in the right or best group, following the best teacher, they were in some way elevating themselves over the lesser groups. This is caused by a deceiving worldly value system.

- 4. What kind of wisdom were the Corinthian Christians using? (Hint: It was the kind that divided people.)**

Verse 19: "the wisdom of this world"

1 Co 3:21-23, Let no one glory in men

- 5. What problem has Paul mentioned so far in the letter that would identify the precise area where they were using this kind of wisdom? What direct statement in this paragraph clearly identifies the same target problem?**

I realize that these questions are redundant, but it is useful to see that Paul is describing the same basic problem from a variety of angles. Chapters 1-4 are the doctrinal foundation for addressing all the problems that follow.

The problem was that they were dividing the congregation by preferred preachers & spiritual leaders. By the world's wisdom each group thought itself superior to the others. Even the "Christ group" was in error in that they preferred the prestige of being in their idea of the "right" group over uniting all members as one body. This bickering was "of the world."

Direct statement: "Let no one glory in men."

6. In what ways do we "glory in men":

a. In the church? Is it wrong then to recognize a good Christian example?

There is no single right answer as to how we glory in men. See what class members think fits the description.

It is not wrong to recognize and admire godliness. But learning and being encouraged by a good example is not the same as becoming a follower of that person and looking down on those who aren't.

b. Outside the church (in daily life)?

There is no single right answer. See what class members think fits the description.

7. What does Paul mean by, "All things are yours" (v. 21), and "all are yours" (v. 22)? What are "all things?" (See 1 Cor 8:6; 11:12; 15:27-28, 57-58. See also Eph 1:3f). What is the relevance to the division in the Corinthian church?

In one sense, Eph 1:3f gives a good answer. We have "all spiritual (as opposed to worldly) blessings." Having spiritual blessings, and especially salvation by Christ crucified, should be all that matters to Christians. If we are saved for eternity, earthly rank and prestige are unimportant.

But Paul may be thinking in more absolute terms. God is God over all that is. He made all things and all things belong to him. As his children we are heirs. All that is his will be ours ("all things present or things to come"). Why choose up sides to become the followers of mere servants when we are children and heirs of God (See Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 4:6-7; 2 Timothy 2:10-12)?

Additional verses about "all things": Romans 8:28, 31-39; 11:36; Philippians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 4:15; 5:17-18; Ephesians 1:10-11, 22; Colossians 1:16-20; 1 Timothy 6:17.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5, Judging God's servants

8. How did Paul want to be considered or regarded by the Corinthian Christians?

As belonging to Christ and therefore to God (3:23).
As a faithful servant of Christ, no more and no less.

9. On what grounds or criteria was Paul (and others) being judged by the Corinthians, thereby leading to their elevation or demotion?

Apparently, they were graded on their skills, eloquence, or something along that line, with their spiritual rank determined by that evaluation.

Today, for example, a preacher's worth may be based on the size of the congregation where he preaches, or the number of invitations he receives to hold Gospel meetings or to speak on lectureships.

10. Basically, what was a steward's responsibility? Whose opinion of the steward's performance mattered?

"Steward" is the rendering in the NKJV and ESV. The NIV has "those entrusted." A steward's basic job was to do faithfully the job his master entrusted to him. His responsibility was to satisfy the expectations of his master.

11. What is the meaning of "judge" in this instance?

The ESV rendering in verse 5 captures the thought: "pronounce judgment." This was more than discernment. Here, it carries the idea of declaring innocent or of condemning.

Ultimately, the judgment that should concern us is final judgment (verse 5). We can identify an action as sin, but only God knows the heart and the eternal impact of that sinful behavior.

12. Of what value is a clear conscience? Did Paul have a clear conscience about his stewardship, and what limits did he attach to his self-evaluation? (See Romans 14:4; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 2 Timothy 1:3.)

His conscience was clear. He is clear about that in 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

But he also proclaimed that the only opinion or judgment that mattered was God's. If he were praised profusely by men, or according to the wisdom of the world, that would not be sufficient. The only judgment that carried any weight was God's, i.e., his master who had entrusted him with his ministry.

We should either have a clear conscience or change whatever is keeping us from having one. But whether we have a clear conscience or not, this does not make us truly innocent or guilty. God's judgment is ultimately the only one that matters. Conscience is another area where we easily and often "deceive ourselves."

13. Is it conceivable that the Almighty God would actually praise you or me? What does this do to your self-evaluation and self-worth? What does it mean to be praised by God?

It is certainly true that God will praise the faithful Christian. Paul says it here and in Romans 2:29. For Paul, that praise was a powerful motivator.

It is praise from God when he says, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).