

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

PREFACE

It is hard-coded in human DNA for each individual to think he or she is smarter than everyone else—not in terms of scholarship or a soaringly high IQ, but in more practical terms of everyday matters.

“The right way to mow the lawn is back and forth, then to change directions the next time you mow.”

“No, the right way to mow the lawn is in a circular fashion, always throwing the grass to the outside.”

“No, you’re both wrong: the correct way to mow the grass is to buy a goat.”

Unfortunately, this “wisdom” does not soften, but typically *hardens* with age. The older one gets, the more one knows the “correct” way to do just about anything. It’s just the way we are made. The impetus to consider ourselves wiser than others is congenital; like our bent toward sin, it doesn’t have to be learned.

Our text revisits the argument that the only way to be *truly* wise is to empty ourselves of the wisdom of this world, and be filled with the wisdom of God. As the paragraph begins, Paul seems to be simply reiterating points he has made before—which he is. But by the end of the paragraph, he will have taken what has been discussed before and turned it around to make a brand new point.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23.

v18-19A

Let no man (one) deceive himself.

In our last session we looked at the made-to-order illustration for v17, the sad tale of the Scottish bishop, Richard Holloway, who, once the leader of the church in Scotland is now bent on destroying it. To illustrate the depths to which Scotland, as a nation, has plummeted in its relationship to God, we noted how as traditional religion and faith has declined in that country, “humanism” has moved in to fill the void and take its place. Humanism is, essentially, the polar opposite of biblical faith; it replaces God as the object of worship with man—human beings—as the object of worship.

Mohler: It’s not just based in something like agnosticism, it’s based in a very clear argument about the absence of God. That is, an atheism that is joined to the elevation of human beings. That’s the very issue of humanism.

There is no greater act of self-delusion than to replace God with man on the throne of one’s life. This is the battle being waged on earth today: If we are not following and worshiping God, we are worshiping ourselves. When any man sets out to “destroy the temple of God” (v17), he is saying, “I am more important than God.” And since God cannot abide idolatry of any sort, He “will destroy him.”

Our self-deception need not be overt and dramatic—such as setting up a shrine to our magnificence in our home—for it to be an offense to God and injurious to our relationship with Him. Just one example from real-life: Every Sunday I can hear people continuing with their conversations while Scripture is being read from the platform. When we do this, we are demonstrating that we consider what we have to say is more important than what *God* has to say. That is a subtle form of placing ourselves before God. And, in line with the rest of v18, it is a subtle way of saying we are *wiser* than He.

If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.

We already know from earlier portions of this letter that the Corinthians did indeed consider themselves to be wise—and more than that, they were *followers* of earthly wisdom and rhetoric. Paul had already spoken against this.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:3-5.

And he will be hitting this again later in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Just as possessions that have become idols in our life must be discarded so as to make room for Christ, self-perceived wisdom, wisdom acquired from this world and this age, must be discarded so as to make room for the wisdom that comes with and from God. It is not enough to pray for wisdom from above; we must pray for God to purge us of the wisdom of this age, to make room for *His* wisdom. In the eyes of this world, by abandoning the wisdom of this age we thus become “foolish,” but that is only because their own “wisdom” has blinded them to the *true* wisdom of God.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

Note that the first sentence of v19 is the reverse of what is said earlier in the letter. There Paul stated that “the word of the cross is foolishness” to the unsaved; In v19 he states that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.” Then Paul grabs a couple of OT references to make his point about the futility of human wisdom.

vv19B-20

For it is written, “He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS”;

The first is from Job 5. Paul quotes v13 probably from the Hebrew text (rather than the Septuagint, which he often references) for v19 in this letter.

Read Job 5:12-13.

The word picture here is of a hunter setting a trap for his prey, but then getting caught in the trap himself. As David Garland puts it, “They are too clever for their own eternal good and always get trapped in their own schemes and ambitions.” The irony here is, of course, that when taken as a whole, the book of Job itself is a poster child for the folly of human wisdom getting trapped by its own ignorance, as the lamenting Job’s collection of “wise” friends dispense their advice to him freely (and at length)—only to be sharply rebuked by the Lord God at the end of the book.

Read Job 38:1-2.

While the Lord speaks directly to Job (perhaps because Job was the only one who spoke directly to the Lord), it is also true that everyone involved in these lengthy exchanges “darken[ed] counsel by words without knowledge.”

and again, “THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS.”

The second quotation used by Paul is from Psalm 94.

Read Psalm 94:10-12.

Sidebar: Paul changes “thoughts of man” (*anthropon*) to the “thoughts (reasonings) of the wise (*sophon*), but this does no violence to the original text, since earlier in Psalm 94 the Lord calls the humans “senseless” and “stupid ones” (v8).

v21A

So then let no one boast in men.

Paul has not yet left the topic with which he opened this letter, where he immediately addressed one of the primary failings of those in the Corinthian church with,

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:11-13)

Earlier in this chapter he also returned to it.

for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. (1 Corinthians 3:3-5)

And now, obviously of the opinion that he needs to keep driving the nail home, he says it again. “Let no one boast in men.” There is a wonderful passage in the prophecy of Jeremiah that speaks to this.

Read Jeremiah 9:23-24.

v21B-23

Now for the twist. Paul has just concluded his multi-chapter campaign against the Corinthians' practice of grouping around allegiance to human individuals with the direct and succinct, "So then let no one boast in men." In the second half of v21 he states the "why" for this; he then, in the concluding verses of Chapter Three, explains what he means by this "why."

For all things belong to you,

One might rightly expect the apostle to follow the previous sentence with what he did in Chapter One: "as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" (v31) His *is* going to say this, in a manner of speaking, but he begins with what on the surface seems a rather odd statement: "For all things belong to you." (plural "you")

whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you,

As if to say, *I'm not kidding*, he expands this to encompass everything there is: their church leaders, the environment and planet, life and death, the present and the future—all things that are, have been, and will be—are theirs now.

It's not often I take issue with Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Here is his response to this.

C. H. Spurgeon: Children of God, all men are yours, to serve your highest benefit.

All ministers and leaders in Christ are yours to seek your souls' good. Treat them as bees do flowers, and gather honey from them all. "All things are yours."

But that is short-sighted, and just nibbles at the edge of the ramifications of this passage.

This is cosmic! Paul wants us to see life as *he* sees life: through the believer's life in Christ Jesus. When one realizes who and what Christ is, and that believers are literally "in" Him, this should change one's perspective on everything. Let's trace this. [Turn please to Ephesians 1.](#)

Read Ephesians 1:9-10.

Read Colossians 1:16-20

Read Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12.

Paul invariably sees all of life in eschatological terms—through the prism of our eternal, irrevocable salvation in Christ. And I can do no better than offer what Gordon Fee has to say about this.

Fee: In the form of the cross God has planted his flag on planet Earth and marked it off as his own possession; hence the “world” is his. So also with the whole of existence (“life” and “death”), which are immediately placed into eschatological perspective (“the present and the future”). Because in Christ Jesus both “life” itself and therefore “the future” are ours, “death” is ours as well, as is “the present.” *We die, but “life” cannot be taken from us; we live the life of the future in the present age, and therefore the present has become our own possession...* This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. They are free lords of all things, not bound to the whims of chance or the exigencies of life and death. The future is no cause for panic; it is already theirs. In light of such expansive realities, how can the Corinthians say, “I am of Paul, or Apollos”? That is too narrow, too constricted a view. Apollos—and Paul, and Peter, and the whole universe—is/are yours. You do not belong to them; they belong to you, as your servants, because “you—and they—are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. (emphasis added)

Verse 23 gives us the final, all-encompassing reason for everything that has been stated thus far. How can we say that all things belong to us? All we have to do is trace our connection to Almighty God, sovereign of the universe.

Here is Father God, and Christ Jesus, *Son of God*, who “belongs to” (“is”) His Father. Christ *is* God, and Christ is *of* God. So now we have the Son who belongs to the Father ([Romans 6:10](#)). Who do we belong to? Who are we of? Because of the cross, we belong to the Son ([Romans 14:7-8](#))—we are *of* Christ Jesus because we are “in” Christ Jesus ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)).