

**United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Deflating the Corinthian's Pride (1 Cor. 4:6-13)**

Intro: In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing teachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them.

As we come to chapter four Paul's tone changes dramatically. He becomes much more confrontational. Having laid the Scriptural groundwork for his remarks he now applies them personally and powerfully to the Corinthians. There are three things he must do:

- Counter the Corinthian's judgment
- Deflate the Corinthian's pride
- Call for the Corinthian's repentance

Let's hear what Paul says to the Corinthians:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. (1 Cor. 4:6-13)

Clearly Paul's language to the Corinthians must have been painful to hear. But at last Paul has explicitly put his finger on the problem at Corinth—pride or arrogance. The Corinthians have been acting out of arrogance toward one another as well as Paul. Consequently, just as Paul must counter the Corinthians judgments of him, he must also deflate the Corinthians' inflated egos.

How does Paul do this?

First by using terms of service to describe the Corinthians' teachers

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. (1 Cor. 4:6)

Correctly understanding this verse is critical to our understanding of the argument Paul is making to the Corinthians and our understanding may be clouded a bit by the traditional use of this verse as a proof text against practicing anything that is not found in the NT. In the first place, the Corinthians didn't have a NT when Paul wrote this letter. So "that which is written" can't be what has not yet been written. Also the Greek text is difficult and there are more than one defensible translation:

Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written; that no one of you be puffed up for the one against the other. (ASV)

I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. (NRSV)

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. (NIV)

The latter two translations attempt to account for the neuter article which might suggest a common slogan. We too have slogans that embody the idea to respect God's word—we speak about "book, chapter, and verse" or "speak where the Bible speaks..."

So what is Paul saying here?

What had Paul figuratively applied or transferred to himself and Apollos?

If we look back over the previous text we can see Paul using figures of servanthood to describe the role of Paul and Apollos in their work for God.

They were workers in God's field; masons in God's temple; servants or stewards in God's house—all of which convey the idea of humble service to a superior.

Why did Paul apply these terms to himself and Apollos?

Paul applies them to himself and Apollos for the benefit of the Corinthians. That instead of exalting men on the basis of human wisdom, they might learn instead stay within the confines the Scriptures' teaching, i.e. what is written.

As the result of not going beyond the Scripture, they would likewise avoid the comparisons based on human wisdom that had made them arrogant toward their teachers and/or toward one another.

What were "the things written?"

Here Paul is not referring to the NT; but rather to those texts that he has been quoting throughout the narrative. Passages like Is. 29:14

(quoted in 1:19), Jer. 9:23 (quoted in 1:31), Is. 64:4 & 65:17 (quoted in 2:9), Is. 40:13 (quoted in 2:16), Job 5:13 & Ps. 94:11 (quoted in 3:20). What these verses taught was the total inadequacy of human wisdom in comparison with the wisdom of God.

So what is Paul's point?

The Corinthians, by their preacher comparisons based on human wisdom, were going beyond the teaching of the Scripture about how human wisdom should be seen in comparison with God's wisdom, with the result that God's wisdom, the wisdom of the cross, was being nullified.

God's wisdom was made known through the message of the cross and the need for men to humble themselves before the Lord and others.

The Corinthians were "going beyond what was written" by exalting men and by displaying arrogance toward Paul and Apollos and consequently toward one another.

By reminding the Corinthians of the source of their wisdom

Paul by some pointed questions asks the Corinthians to recall where they got what they have:

For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Cor. 4:7)

Each of these questions can be answered:

The answer to the first is, "no one!"

The answer to the second is "nothing!"

The answer to the third is "it is absurd to do so."

The fact is, everything that the Corinthians really knew that was truly wise they had gotten from those who taught them the gospel and ultimately from God. How could they presume that they were "wiser" than those who had taught them or more importantly the God who saved them?

By contrasting in irony the condition of the teachers with the presumed condition of the Corinthians

In biting irony Paul describes how the Corinthians as disciples were viewing themselves:

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. (1 Cor. 4:8)

To hear the Corinthians speak of their wisdom, one would think they were men who had earned the highest position in society—kings living in palaces enjoying the abundance of their wealth. And Paul says, "And I wish it were so, so that we might reign with you."

But for Paul and his fellow-workers, their condition was quite different. Were they enjoying the highest position in society? No, instead:

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. (1 Cor. 4:9)

Far from being kings, Paul and his fellow-teachers might more properly be likened to the captured criminals of warfare being led along at the end of the emperor's triumph and who were on display in spectacle before being slaughtered in the Roman forum.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. (1 Corinthians 4:10)

So we have two groups of people in starkly different positions; could they both be experiencing the consequences of the same message?

For God's true messengers, embracing the message of the cross had resulted in a life of suffering and hardship.

To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. (1 Cor. 4:11-13)

For Paul to describe all that he and his fellow-workers had endured for the sake of the gospel was to remind the Corinthians that they were apparently not living out the message of the cross—that God uses the weak, powerless, and the shameful to accomplish His purposes.

And it was to remind that Corinthians that whatever blessings they had received through the gospel had come through the hardships of the very men that they were now treating with condemning arrogance.

I suspect that the most of the Corinthians would have, when they heard this read, felt like they were about two feet tall! But even so, it was necessary in order to deflate their arrogant attitudes.

How does this message instruct us?

Certainly we could not read these personal remarks as if they were addressed directly to us; but we can surely learn from this painful confrontation.

First it is a reminder of the need not to forget in a more immediate sense how we got where we are. Most of us are Christians because of the sacrifices and patient teaching of others. Do we then humbly appreciate them or do we pridefully scorn them?

I'm reminded here of a tendency in our time for those who think themselves more enlightened in Scripture to ridicule and sometimes laugh to scorn those who in great humility and devotion were seeking to discover the truth of God and pass what they learned along to us.

Even if they were not always correct in their understanding, what room is there for the kind of ridicule and contempt that is sometimes shown for them?

How quickly do we dismiss the views of those who've gone before us without taking the time to fully understand it or to appreciate the wisdom that there might be in it?

Would this not reflect the pride that Paul sought to eradicate from the Corinthians?

Second it is a reminder that no manifestation of arrogance or pride is compatible with the message of our humble Savior and His sacrifice for us. There is no room for boasting. All that we are and all that we shall be will be the result, not of our wisdom, but of what God has graciously given us in Christ. There is no ground for one person claiming superiority over another in the community created by the cross. Instead, there is the need to live out the message of the cross by humbly loving and serving those around us. Third it is a reminder that all of our thinking must finally be tested by “what is written.” We correctly use 1 Cor. 4:6 to establish the principle that we must respect “what is written.” We still must depend upon a word from God to determine the standards by which we determine how to serve God. When we leave that standard, it is replaced with prideful human opinion that exalts itself against the word of God. Fourth it is a reminder that even when we think we are following the Scripture, there is no grounds for the arrogant condemnation and abuse of others who disagree. If “having the truth” makes us arrogant, we don’t yet have the truth as we should.

Conclusion: I’ve often used 1 Cor. 4:6 in sermons about the need to stay within the authority of Scripture; but I’ve never before tonight preached a sermon on the paragraph in which it is found. I’m glad I’ve had the opportunity to do that. It brings to our mind an important lesson about humility in our service to God and in addition an important message about respecting the authority of “what is written.”