

A Humble Life

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:13

Introduction

Success: What does success look like? End your life arrested, alone, no money. Church plant with no followers, leader is a criminal?

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." ²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. ^{4:1} This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. ⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? ⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

1. Don't Be Deceived (vv. 18-23)

- This section (ch. 4) is both a summary and a transition, as Paul wraps up what he's been saying and moves to a personal example before transitioning to a new topic. He is still concerned with the pride and division in the Corinthian church.

The Deception of Pride: ¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. A hallmark of sin is pride and self-delusion.

- We think we are **more** important, more valuable, more accomplished, and more righteous than we really are. We think we **less** wicked, less gullible, and less fallible than we really are.
 - **We live in age of self-deception.** We think we can outwork, out-scheme, out-hustle our problems.
 - ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and **do not lean on your own understanding.** ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ **Be not wise in your own eyes;** fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones (Prov 3:5-8).
 - We have a lot of people in our world “wise in their own eyes” but fools in the eyes of God.
- Humility is not only essential to Christian living but to Christian salvation. To be saved we must humble ourselves and acknowledge our sin and need of a savior (you can't be found until you admit that you're lost).
 - Jesus + Nothing = Everything. We often want to add Jesus to our own desires and dreams. **We want him to cosign on the life we envision rather than surrender to the life he has called us to.**
- Don't be deceived, you can't work your way to God, you surrender to him. You either let it all go and take what he gives or you get nothing that he offers.
 - The way to blessing is not to achieve more but to surrender more. The path of exaltation is to be a servant (Phil 2:5-11). To be wise, you must become a fool. To be exalted, you must be humbled. If you want to live, then you have to die to yourself and take up your cross. The way up is down.

The Lie of the World: ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” ²⁰ and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

- The lie of the world is that we can **outthink, outwork, out-behave** our need for God. Through enough hustle, discipline, intelligence, or luck we can save ourselves and save the world. **This is false!** There is only one way to salvation, only one “name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

This isn't Paul's private opinion, this has always been the truth of God's gospel. He quotes Job 5:12-13 and Psalm 94:11 showing that worldly wisdom is actual foolishness. Often, God uses the very thing we place above God to ruin us and show us our need for God.

- Because our God loves us, he will destroy our idols (like a parent who takes a knife out of the hand of a child). **God knows that if he doesn't destroy our idols, our idols will destroy us.** An ancient story tells of four brothers who each mastered a special ability. The first said, "I have mastered a science by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." The second said, "I know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third continued, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." The fourth concluded, "And I know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete." Then the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialities. The bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third

completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped and killed them all. We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams that consume us. Possessions and property can turn and destroy us. Relationships that harm us.

When you fight against God, in the end, you never win.

- William Tyndale (16th c.) wanted to translate the Bible into English so that the everyday Englishman could read and understand it (it was in Latin at the time and the Law didn't even allow subjects to learn the Lord's Prayer in English). Tyndale was constantly running for his life (eventually executed) and managed to translate the NT and have it printed elsewhere in Europe. After smuggling these prints back into England, they were *bought* by the bishop (Tunstall) to be burned only for Tyndale to use the money to print improved versions. What Tunstall thought would quell the problem only served to advance the gospel (cf. Phil 1).

Boast in the Right Thing: ²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. It doesn't say that "boasting" is wrong but that boasting in the wrong thing is wrong.

- "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31)
- "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).
- The issue is that **we put our hope too often in the wrong place**. When we boast in humans we limit the options in front of us to human personalities and ingenuity.

There was an ancient Greek philosophical maxim that said, "The wise man possesses all things." This reinforced their value of human wisdom. If you are wise then you can earn money, gain notoriety, and succeed in life. But the onus is still on *you*.

- This is a lose-lose situation. What happens when you fail or succeed at the wrong thing? Despair and loss.
- The gospel is the only win-win. God cannot fail. You live for Christ or you die and get Christ!

The gospel reminds us that even if we have nothing in the world we have everything in Christ.

- We don't just have Paul's power, or Apollos' wisdom, or Cephas' (Peter's) tradition. In Christ we have them all.
 - The gospel frees us to enjoy all of God's truth. Tribalism shrinks our opportunity (fundamentalism draws the circle tighter and tighter until you're the only one standing in it, leaves no room even for Christ).
- "Every possible experience in life, and even the experience of death itself, *belongs* to Christians, in the sense that in the end it will turn out to be for their good" (Thrall).

Mirror: Paul is holding up a mirror to our hearts. Where is your boast? Where is your hope? Boasting in any mere human (whether yourself or others) is a recipe for disaster but, *unfortunately*, is the more common way.

- Boasting in man leads to failure, but boasting in Christ leads to salvation. Pride in ourselves fails us but surrender saves us.

2. Seek God's Approval (vv. 1-5)

Servants: ^{4:1} This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

- Paul describes himself (and Apollos and other leaders) as “**servants**” (ὑπηρέτας) and “**stewards**” (οἰκονόμους). διάκονος used in 3:5.
 - Servant here is meant to describe a particular type of lowly service (e.g., “underrower”).
 - Steward describes a house manager.
- Leaders in the church are meant to be servants not celebrities. Leaders in the church are meant gravitate toward the bottom, not the top.
 - One reason we (rightfully) distrust a lot of authority in our culture is because we have seen it abused for personal gain rather than leveraged for the good of others.

Stewards: This picture of a “house manager” has a lot of use in the NT (including the gospels). Whatever authority or power a Christian leader has, it is **delegated authority**.

- We have no authority on our own, whatever power we have comes from God (e.g., White House Chief of Staff).

That's why our call is to stewardship. We have been entrusted with “mysteries of God.” What are the mysteries of God? Did Adam have a belly button? Who are the Nephilim? **The mystery of God is the gospel message that has been revealed** (not hidden secrets but uncovered mysteries). How God has worked to save his people. The plan and purpose of God that comes to fruition in Christ.

- God, in his grace, has entrusted us with that message. We are the mailman delivering the message.
- Think about a large estate in 2TJ (first century). There is no email. Travel takes forever. When the wealthy master goes away he is leaving his top servant in charge of his property, his other servants, his family, his children. It matters how that servant behaves.

How have you been doing with the gospel message you've been entrusted?

- Have you been **faithful** (trustworthy) with the responsibilities God has entrusted you?
- Have you invested the gifts, relationships, time, and resources *he's* given you (it's all from him) into *his kingdom* or your own comfort?
 - This is our true metric of success. Faithfulness. Wise investment. Giving rather than receiving. Sending rather than hoarding.

The Judge: ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Paul, knowing he's been a faithful steward, considers the judgment of the immature Corinthians a trivial thing. Why would he care what they say? They're worldly, sinful, etc.

- In some sense, this is true of all human judges. All humans judges have limitations (they are not all-knowing, all-seeing, etc. They have biases, etc.

- They are second-guessing (scrutinizing) his apostolic work and authority (Monday morning quarterback; “we” shoulda).

But even his own self-assessment isn't important compared to God's assessment.

- Self-awareness matters, but not as much as God awareness. It's hard to have an accurate awareness of self.
 - A lot of people view their opinion of themselves very highly. We judge ourselves on a curve. Just because your conscience is clear doesn't mean your life is clean (I might and certainly have missed something; “ignorance is bliss but its consequences can still be disastrous”).

Who determines faithfulness? God (our master/Lord).

- To be a servant you need a master. Who determines whether your job performance is up to par?
 - This should be a great relief to those who are faithfully serving God.
 - This should be a great warning to those who are serving themselves.

Withhold Judgment: ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. In some sense, **all judgment this side of eternity is premature**. Only God is the perfect and final judge. And any judgment we pronounce now is only as strong as it conforms to his Word.

- We should be careful not to be presumptuous or premature.
- *Then* (not now), *God* (not man) will perfectly judge.

God will reveal *it all*, not just your actions but the **motives of your heart** (not just aiming for “right” behavior but “pure hearts”).

- Am I serving this person to feel better about myself? (e.g., slacktivism)

3. The Cruciform Life (vv. 6-13)

Personal Example: ⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

- Paul comes to a real moment of truth highlighting the difference between his ministry and the Corinthians. No more metaphors and images, time to get down to the nuts and bolts.
 - Paul is going to “come hard in the paint” (scold them, cf. “rod or gentleness” v. 21).
 - He's going to use his personal life to highlight the pride and immaturity of the Corinthian church.

I want to be careful here. **I don't want to break a bruised reed**. If you are repentant and acknowledge your shortcoming, there is grace in Christ. Don't beat yourself up, turn to Jesus. **But if you are proud in your self-righteousness**, if you think you're doing just fine, then God wants to humble you (even if it hurts). Not high self-esteem or low self-esteem (both are focus on you) but humility and confidence in God (eyes on God).

- All these things, everything that has been said up to now, (call to sanctification, tribalism, pride, wisdom and foolishness, flesh and spirit, etc.).
- His own life is a reminder not to go beyond what is written. He has already quoted Scripture at least **six** times.
 - The Corinthians think they know better than God's Word. They can pursue the ways of the world and not fall to pride. They can have the acclaim of the world and the blessing of God. They can have God's kingdom and their little earthly kingdom. They can be wise in the eyes of the world and the eyes of God.
 - You can't have it both ways.

No Exceptions: ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

- What makes you better than others? What makes you an exception?
 - A hallmark of pride is to think we really did earn or deserve what we have.
- Pride sets you up for failure because it blinds you to the danger that is coming. The battle against pride starts with seeing all that you have as a gift of God ("born on third base but think you hit a triple"). In fact, the battle against all sin starts with seeing God.
 - The antidote to pride (and all sin) is making much of God, glorying in God, focusing on God, meditating on God, loving God.
 - Pride is not-so-subtle form of unbelief because it is a turning away from Jesus to self (HT Piper).

Sarcasm: ⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

- There is a heavy dose of sarcasm here because Paul is trying to make the point that their sin is not satisfying them.
 - ²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 3:26-31).
- Are they rich? Are they rulers? They don't need Paul. Maybe Paul could get in on their success.
 - They are pursuing this way of thinking (ruling, wealth, etc.) (cf. yas Queen/King).

Apostolic Life: ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When

reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

- Three contrasts: fool/wise, weak/strong, disrepute/honor.
- Six Tribulations: hunger, thirst, raggedy (dressed), beaten, homeless, difficult work
- Three responses: reviled/bless, persecuted/endure (put up with), slandered/encourage

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned... ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:1-3, 14-21).

- The gospel calls us to an alternate way of living, a way that lives and loves like Jesus. It is a powerful counterexample to the patterns of this world.
- The Corinthians look and act like the world, Paul looks and acts like Christ. There is only way to eternal life and that is through Jesus, which means there is only one way to truly live and it is the way of Jesus.
- "To belong to Christ is not a way of assuring success or a trouble-free life; quite the opposite... The image of the suffering apostle should be held clearly before our eyes, and then we should ask ourselves: are we sure we want to belong to Christ and share his way" (Hayes).
- For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake (Phil 1:29)
- Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God (2 Tim 1:8).

There is an insidious, self-righteousness that is present even in those who seem to be the most godly. **When bad things happen we think**, I've obeyed you Jesus (cf. Lk 15 "older brother"), shouldn't I get my "blessing" now? We too often think following Jesus should be easy. It's not easy *but it's worth it*.

- ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil 3:8-11).

- The fellowship of his suffering is the only way to the power of Christ's resurrection. There's a famous story about Dominic (12th c.). He visited the Pope, and the Pope was surrounded by all the wealth and splendour of early medieval Rome, and the Pope boasted that Peter can no longer say "Silver and gold I have none." Dominic replied, "Yes, but then again, neither can he say, 'Rise up and walk.'"
- If we are going to be like Christ then we will embody the gospel, which is that Christ **suffered in our place**. We suffer so others can find life in Christ. We sacrifice so others can live (e.g., foster care).
- We are rarely more like Christ than when we suffer for the gospel. And when we die to ourselves we can truly experience fellowship with Christ.

Conclusion

Are you investing your life in the advance of the gospel (like Paul) or in yourself and your comfort (like the Corinthians)?

- Does your heart value the person and plan of Christ or your own plan?
- Will you follow where God calls you and do what he tells you, or only if it lines up with what you already want?
- A humble life (the way of Christ) or a proud life (your way).