

1 Corinthians 3:18 – 4:17

^{3:18} Let no man deceive himself;

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

are you 'wise'?

¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

For it is written, 'He is the One who catches the wise in their craftiness';

²⁰ and again, 'The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.'

²¹ So then let no one boast in men.

For all things belong to you,

²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas

or the world or life or death or things present or things to come;

apostles belong to you
you belong to God

all things belong to you,

²³ and you belong to Christ;

and Christ belongs to God.

^{4:1} Let a man regard us in this manner,

as servants of Christ

and stewards of the mysteries of God.

we are stewards of God's mysteries

² In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards
that one be found trustworthy.

³ But to me it is a very small thing

that I may be examined by you,

or by any human court;

in fact, I do not even examine myself.

the Lord examines me

⁴ For I am conscious of nothing against myself,

yet I am not by this acquitted;

but the one who examines me is the Lord.

⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time,

but wait until the Lord comes

who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness

and disclose the motives of men's hearts;

and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

the Lord will reveal all secrets

⁶ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied

to myself and Apollos for your sakes,

so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written,

so that no one of you will become arrogant

in behalf of one against the other.

apostles are examples for you
you don't be arrogant

⁷ For who regards you as superior?

What do you have that you did not receive?

And if you did receive it,

why do you boast as if you had not received it?

are you superior?

^{4:8} You are already filled, you have already become rich,
you have become kings without us;
and indeed, I wish that you had become kings
so that we also might reign with you!

you are 'kings'

⁹ 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 a spectacle

¹⁰ 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.

we are weak, you are 'strong'

¹¹ To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty,
and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;

we are hungry, thirsty
persecuted, slandered

¹² and we toil, working with our own hands;
when we are reviled, we bless;
when we are persecuted, we endure;

¹³ 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.

we are the scum, dregs

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish
you as my beloved children.

I write to admonish

¹⁵ For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ,
yet you would not have many fathers,
for in Christ Jesus

you are my children

I became your father through the gospel.

I am your father
therefore imitate me

¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy,
who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord,
and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ,
just as I teach everywhere in every church.

he is my child

he will remind you what I teach

Historical and Cultural Background

Being Wise, Being Filled, Being Rich, Being Kings

- Paul was not being anti-intellectual, but sarcastically critiquing the Corinthians on their definition of wisdom and their assumption that practical wisdom leads you to be successful and rich. In Greece, traveling ‘Sophists’ or philosophers would visit a city, and if they made a good impression, win citizenship, set up a school, and begin receiving male students for a fee. Students would then become devoted to their teachers, imitating their speech, walk, dress, etc. They would also debate students from other schools, engaging in verbal and sometimes physical attacks. The Corinthians projected this ‘battle of the teachers’ onto the Christian apostles, as if Paul and Apollos and Simon Peter were opponents.
- Stoic philosophy was the most popular Greek philosophy of the time. The Stoics believed that the world as a whole was basically divine, and therefore nothing was wrong with it (pantheism). They thought the universe passed through various stages in a great, unending circle. Humans were to become content, self-sufficient, and unaffected by circumstance. ‘This is what constitutes true freedom; the truly wise are truly free, and are indeed ‘kings’.’¹ Some Corinthian Christians seem to have been influenced by this idea. Read the Wikipedia article *The Problem of Evil in Hinduism* for a few paragraphs to see how this is still relevant.

Quotes from the Scriptures: Human Wisdom and Wise Men

- ‘He is the One who catches the wise in their craftiness.’ Paul quotes from the speech of Job’s friend Eliphaz the Temanite (Job 5:13 in 1 Cor.3:19). Ironically, however, God catches Eliphaz in his own ‘wisdom’ as well, and rebukes him (Job 42:7). Thus, in addition to being true in a strict sense, this is also ironic. Paul surely intended the irony to carry over from the book of Job to his own context.
- ‘The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.’ Paul quotes from Psalm 94:11 (in 1 Cor.3:20). The Psalm is a prayer for God to rise up to defend His true people. In this context, ‘the wise’ are the oppressive human enemies of God’s people.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2013), p.214 – 216 cites Diogenes Laertes 7.122

Questions

1. As people study, ask: How were the apostles of Jesus doing in a socio-economic sense? How were the Greek Sophists doing in a socio-economic sense?
2. According to their cultural lens, why would the Corinthians have thought that Paul was a failure? Perhaps the other apostles, too? (Leader: you may have to state these to remind people)
 - a. Paul worked a manual labor job; he was a tentmaker. He worked with goat skin, weaving, stitching. Paul, as a Jewish rabbi, learned it from his father and was probably proud of his trade. But in Greek culture, a 'successful teacher' should not be working with his hands. He should be charging students a fee.
 - b. Paul also refused to receive a financial offering from the Corinthians even though he was entitled to it by the teaching of Jesus (1 Cor.9:1 – 18).
 - c. Paul had scars on his back from his rejections from two synagogues. At this point in his life, Paul had endured two of the five floggings – the forty lashes minus one – he would receive in his lifetime (2 Cor.11:24). The floggings expressed official synagogue rejection: one at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50) a few years ago and the other, just a few months ago in Philippi (Acts 16:22).
 - d. Paul had also been stoned and left for dead in Lystra (Acts 14:19). He probably never fully recovered from that. He might have had permanent eye damage, as the Galatians apparently would have given him one of their good eyes (Gal.4:15). He probably walked with some joint problems after that, too.
 - e. Illus: When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in jail, some people felt ashamed about him. Of course, those who knew the real story and his strategy knew that it was all part of the civil rights plan. But those who didn't had doubts. If their leader was in jail, what did that mean?
3. Why is the wisdom of the world foolishness before God? Be mindful that Paul is not being anti-intellectual.
 - a. The wisdom of this world, in Greek culture, is like using your teaching to become rich. It's where you rally around different teachers or wise men or philosophers, and they look good because they've charged money and made a fortune.
 - b. On a deeper level, the wisdom of the world is a deduction made about reality and God based on what people could observe in day to day life. It's like YOLO.
 - c. Illus: My mom disowned me for a little while because she thought I was not being wise, practical, and successful. Back in 1995, I moved into a small city called East Palo Alto, CA to live among Mexican immigrant families. In 1992, East Palo Alto had the highest murder rate per capita out of any city in the nation. I decided to live there because that's where I thought Jesus would live if he was in the middle of Silicon Valley. I was already playing guitar for worship for a Spanish-speaking Bible study. And most of the folks lived in this particular apartment complex. I moved in because I wanted to understand their lives better and know them more deeply. My mom came to visit me once, and she hated where I lived. It's a longer story but because she is not a Christian, she had no ability to understand why this was important. So she disowned me for a while. She later changed her mind, but this is exactly the kind of thing that Paul is talking about.
 - d. Leader: When have you looked foolish for Jesus' sake? Reflect on a social cost you have paid as a result of following Jesus.
4. How does Paul view himself and Apollos and other Christian leaders here?
 - a. As 'servants of Christ,' not servants of public opinion or today's fashion.
 - b. As 'stewards of the mysteries of God.' The word 'steward' means that they don't own the message they are passing on. They were entrusted with it, and commissioned to be faithful to it by transmitting it. The word 'mysteries' refers to something that was not revealed before but now is. It's not that it's hard to understand. It's that it is now coming to light.
 - c. As partners together in mission.
 - d. Illus: My daughter Zoe was born in October of 2002, and with her birthday coming up, I was reflecting on my relationship with her. Zoe did not really like me for the first five years of her life. She was a total mama's girl. That was really surprising for me because my son liked me from the day he was born. Also, I had friends my age who had daughters and they had really fun father-daughter relationships. But that wasn't the case for me. From the time Zoe could turn her little head, she would turn her head away from me when I held her. I would hold her up and try to look at her in the eyes and smile, and she would turn her head in some other direction and fix it there.

Sometimes I could hold her and help her to stop crying but more often she just liked mom. Nowadays I can see that she really likes food, and looking back I can see how she really liked nursing. Nothing I could do about that. She also loved to hold Ming's hair. Since I have really short hair, I can't compete in that department either. So what could I do? Now on the one hand, I love my wife! I'm totally glad that my daughter loves my wife! And who wouldn't like my wife Ming better than me? She's more beautiful than I am, more interesting than I am, and almost always more fun than I am. But on the other hand, I still did want a healthy relationship with my little girl, for my sake and for hers. So what was the appropriate thing for me to do? Monopolize Zoe's time? No. Disguise myself and pretend I was Ming? No. Turn it into a competition between mom and dad? No. I had to show her that Ming and I are one even though we are two. God says that when Ming and I got married, He made two become one. But mostly that meant waiting patiently and loving her throughout. Over time, when she started walking, Zoe would come over to the couch where Ming and I were sitting. She would sit between us. Before, she would sit on Ming's side. I still remember one morning when Zoe was a few years old. She came in the early morning to our bed, climbed in, and wanted to snuggle between us. And I even remember the morning when she climbed into the bed and wanted to snuggle with me. She began to realize that mom and dad are one. She was too young to think this, but in her heart, I sensed that she learned something: 'They come as a package! And they both love me.' Zoe started to understand the deeper reality of how she is loved.

- e. Poor now, but rich in Christ. They'll be rewarded later. Christian leaders are to be like Christ, who was marginalized himself, and of course crucified.
 - f. Illus: A church was in need of a pastor for some time but was having trouble getting one; but not because pastors weren't applying, but because the congregation always seemed to find fault with the pastors. Most pastors were rejected when the people just read the résumé. Some weren't eloquent enough. Some didn't dress nicely enough. Some didn't have enough formal education. A few were considered to be a little rough around the edges, a little crass in humor, not refined enough, not into golf, and so on. One day a board member, who was getting very tired of this, decided to do something. So the next Sunday, he announced that he had another résumé to share with the congregation. Most of them sat back, folded their arms and began to listen; ready to see what faults they could find on the new applicant. The board member began to read and the résumé went like this... *Dear church members; I am writing to apply for a position as your pastor. My experience is more along the lines of evangelist but I believe I could fill your position adequately. I've never attended any bible school per se but I have a lot of field experience. I don't have a degree on my wall, or a wall for that matter; I've traveled around most of my life, renting and doing odd jobs to support myself and preaching wherever I was invited: churches, streets, even jails. As a matter of fact, I've been thrown in jail several times and been involved in a few public squabbles. I've been accused of being anti-Semitic, anti-authority and causing disturbances almost everywhere I go. But I did have a few conversions to Christ during my ministry as well as a few healings. Thank you for considering my application.* Most of the people looked up at the board member with smirks of condemnation while others chuckled out loud. One man stood up and still laughing asked, 'Does this guy actually expect us to seriously consider him for our pastor? Just what's this fellow's name any way?' The board member replied that the letter was signed *the Apostle Paul*. You could have heard a pin drop.
 - g. Illus: My mentor David Miyahara stretched out his PhD dissertation work to disciple me and a bunch of other people. It took 9 years for him to complete his PhD, which is a little embarrassing for doctoral students. Most people try to be done in 4 – 5 years because it starts to look bad on your resume. And he and his girlfriend (now wife) Maureen decided to wait until he was almost done to get married; so they dated almost 9 years! Though she was also finishing up medical school.
5. How does Paul view the judgment of Jesus here?
- a. Jesus' judgment and 'examination' of him is far more important than the Corinthians examining him. Later in 9:3, he says, 'My defense to those who examine me is this...' and then he explains why he didn't take any of the money the Corinthians offered him. He sensed something wrong in them. How were they examining him? By looking down on him. He doesn't look at himself through that lens.

- b. In fact, he says, I don't care what you think. Why would he say this? Possibly because Paul might have had some doubts about himself. Maybe I should dress better? Maybe I should charge a fee just to hear the message? Maybe I should just fit into the culture? But he is committed to Jesus first, and not Greek culture. (Note that Paul is not saying he never reflects on himself; he demonstrates his own introspection elsewhere)
 - c. The judgment of Jesus is a judgment that is going to be searching, absolutely truthful, and without any error.
 - d. Paul welcomes it! That's surprising because we might fear it. Even if Jesus examines him and discovers something wrong, Paul will be glad to have that purged out of him by fire, as he said in 3:13 – 15, 'for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.' Whether in this life or the next, Jesus will burn that stuff out of Paul. And because Paul already wants more of Jesus in himself, he's not afraid.
 - e. Illus: There was a movie that came out back in 2002 with Denzel Washington. It was called John Q. Denzel played John Quincy Archibald, who is the father of a young boy, Michael. Michael has a defective heart, and John's health insurance policy will not cover the surgery. So John gets a gun and takes the hospital hostage. His gun is actually empty, but no one knows that except him. By the end, he actually becomes friends with all his hostages, and has his son brought to the operating room. He puts one bullet into the empty gun, revealing to everyone that he had only ever planned to kill himself. He persuades the surgeon to take his heart and put it into his son, Michael's body. Now in the movie, there is a plot twist. At the last minute, a helicopter flies in a woman who had been killed in a car accident. She was a match for Michael, so John doesn't have to kill himself. Michael gets a new heart after all. But in our story, there was no plot twist. The plot carried all the way through. And in this story, we have a defective heart. Jesus becomes our heart transplant donor because he alone killed the defect through his death, and raised up a new human heart in himself in his resurrection. In this life, we are in the process of receiving Jesus' new heart, by his Spirit living in us. That's good for us, because we do not want that defective heart! But it is a process. That's why we are called to disclose Jesus in every aspect of our lives. And when Jesus returns to renew all things, he will finish what he started in us. That is his judgment – a judgment of setting things right. He will bring to light everything that we tried to keep hidden, because everything in us that we held onto that doesn't fit with him, he's just going to kick out. He will tell our stories from his point of view, which is the objective point of view. He will disclose every one of our motives. Did we love Jesus or not? The more of him we loved, the more of him we'll have. The more of him we wanted for others, the more of him we will receive in others.
 - f. Illus: One of my heroes is an Indian man named V.S. Azariah, who was called by Mahatma Gandhi 'enemy number one.' He was the first Indian to be consecrated a bishop in the Anglican church, and he was one of the most significant Christian leaders in India. He was instrumental in the conversion of thousands of people who were in the untouchables, or dalits, caste. They were people at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. Gandhi hated this because he wanted India to be Hindu. The other great Indian politician, Ambedkhar, didn't like it either. But that wasn't all. Azariah wanted the Indian church to have Indian leaders who understood Indian culture, not Englishmen who didn't. He wanted the Indian church to be independent of Western Christian organizations and Western Christian money. So he cut himself off from a lot of Western *money*. That's what it boiled down to. That was courageous!! Yet despite the lack of Western money, bishop V.S. Azariah became the most successful leader of grassroots Christianity in South Asia during the twentieth century. By the end of Azariah's life in 1945, the vast majority of Christians in India came from the dalit class. He disclosed Jesus. I'm sure when Jesus discloses him, it will be amazing.
6. In what sense does Paul mean, 'Be imitators of me' in 4:16?
- a. In attitude: He wants to serve, and is glad to just be helpful, and used by Jesus
 - b. In mission: for example, the students at MIT taking only four classes?
 - c. In accepting social rejection for the sake of Christ
7. Application: If a younger Christian or a person who was exploring faith were to say to you, 'Can I hang out with you and watch everything you do in terms of loving Jesus and loving others?' how would you

feel? Where would you feel like that would be a healthy experience for that person? Where would you feel like it would not be healthy? In what area of your life do you sense Jesus wants to strengthen you?

8. Application: What mentors (Christian, if the person is Christian) have you had? What did you learn from them?
 - a. Often, I think that we are drawn to certain mentors because we have a similar gifting as ourselves, only in a more developed form. So we can really appreciate who they are and the strengths they have.
 - b. It might also lead us to undervalue others, who don't have the giftings/strengths that we want to grow in. Has that happened to you?
 - c. What kind of mentors do you want right now? To develop what in you?