

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:6-13

### INTRODUCTION

Last time we looked at the identity of Pastors and Elders and we saw that they were servants of Christ and not the church. Then we considered the requirement of Pastors and Elders and we discovered that they must be faithful men. Finally we considered how to evaluate a Pastor and Elder and we saw that only on the day of judgement will the true value of anyone's ministry be discovered.

Now Paul addresses the church again and he wants to deal with the problem of conceit within the church. The Lord Jesus gave to the church the greatest example of humility that we could ever have through the incarnation (Philippians 2:6-8). However the Corinthian church had not learned that virtue as they should have and so Paul confronts the problem by contrasting the sin of their own conceit with the example of the Apostles humility.

### 1. THE CORINTHIAN'S CONCEIT (vs.6-8)

Sadly the church at Corinth was full of pride and it was very boastful. It was their pride that caused the church to be divided as one supported Paul more than Peter or Apollos etc. The church was very proud of its own human wisdom and it was that carnal pride that caused many of the problems that we have and will continue to discover as we go through this letter. Their leaders were humble men, servants of the Lord people like Paul and Apollos and Peter and the Corinthian church had much cause to rejoice over them.

But instead of being humble and grateful to God they had become very proud and conceited. Now throughout this letter so far, Paul has been teaching the church not to exalt human wisdom or human leaders and Paul tells us here that all that he has said so far has been applied to himself and Apollos for the benefit of the church at Corinth.

In other words Paul and Apollos have been given to the church in order that the church might learn from their example so that they might know what a servant of Church who is applying God's wisdom in his life looks like. They are examples to the church so that they might be able to see how God's word applied into one's life is worked out in practice.

It's one thing to say that a leader should be a servant of Christ but it is another thing to actually see that principle worked out clearly into someone's life. Paul and Apollos were so unlike the church at Corinth for the church was proud but these men were humble, they were faithful servants of Christ. Paul wants the church to learn from their lives the principle that they must not go beyond what is written (v 6). But what does Paul mean here? Well God's faithful servants are to receive proper honour and respect.

We are to respect those who labour among us and have responsibility over us (1 Thessalonians 5:12). We are to obey our leaders (Hebrews 13:17), but we must never go further than what is written in God's word in our appreciation and support and obedience to our leaders. The problem in the church at Corinth had gone way beyond the boundaries of Scripture when it came to Paul and Apollos and Peter.

They had become so committed to them that they had divided the church over the issue of leadership, they had become so exalted by the church that they were using their appreciation of their leaders to exalt their own pride. If they do not go beyond what is written then they will learn not to take pride in one man over another (v 6).

So there must always be balance in the relationship between Christian leaders and the rest of the church. We are indeed to respect honour and obey our leaders as long as they are biblical and godly men who are living godly lives among us and setting an example to us. But we are not to make them like little gods so that we become more committed to them rather than to Christ.

It is possible to exalt one leader over other leaders and even over Christ himself; we can do this unintentionally but very easily. So we must always be careful with our relationship with Pastors and Elders within God's church. Misplaced loyalty inescapably brings hostility to others who are God's servants, it can cause envy competition and sadly even division.

Now pride expresses itself in a number of ways and one of the ways that it expresses itself is in boasting a proud heart will boast of the things or people in which it takes pride. So Paul deals with this outward manifestation of a proud heart by asking a series of questions each one showing that they have nothing to boast about (v 7). Paul asks "who makes you different from anyone else" (v 7)?

Why do you think that you are superior to anyone else in the church? Why do you think that your group that supports Paul or Apollos is better than any other group of the church? Then he asks, "What do you have that you did not receive? "What does anyone have that in one way or another was not given to them? Did we give ourselves life, the food we enjoy and the care and protection we receive or the education or the talents that we possess.

Do they not come to us from the Lord through his wonderful acts of providence? Then of course there are the spiritual blessings. We have salvation in Christ, eternal life, the work of the Holy Spirit, his word; spiritual gifts the love of God in our hearts and countless other blessings that come to us by the grace and mercy of God.

We did not receive such blessings because of our background or upbringing we simply received them from the hand of God purely by grace. So what has anyone to boast about? How can the Paul party or the Apollos party think it is better than others in the church or that their man is better. It simply should not be, such boasting should never exist in God's church. Now we can all do this.

We can all think that we are the greatest gift to this church that this church would not survive without me. Look at the task I do in the church no one could ever replace me no one could ever do it as well as I do it. Such thinking comes from a proud heart. We can do the same thing concerning Pastors and preachers. We might think that you could never get another Pastor like the one we have.

Preachers can be compared to other preachers that you personally love and benefit from and we can almost become like the church at Corinth and think that there is no one like ..... But the truth is that the gifts you possess and use in the church or the gifts that a Pastor or preacher might display are all equal for none of us is better than anyone else because all that we receive comes to us by God's gift of grace.

This is so that we can use our gifts for the proper functioning of the church of Jesus Christ and not for boasting. So we must all be careful not to think that we are indispensable that we are simply God's gift to this church. The truth is we are all God's gifts to this church and we must all use our gifts for his glory. In the same way we can be overpowered by those in the church who appear to have the more important gifts. I say 'appear' for in reality every gift is important and necessary for the church otherwise the Lord would not have given us those gifts, So no one should feel useless or unwanted and we must make sure that we don't make people feel that way by our attitude to them for none of us have any reason to boast or feel superior because all that we have comes to us from God for the benefit of his church.

The third question follows on logically from what Paul has been saying. He says "and if you did receive it why do you boast as though you did not?" Paul logically says if you have received everything from the hand of the Lord why are you boasting as if you did not receive it? You are boasting as if it was you who gave to the church, Paul or Apollos.

Their boasting was simply exposing the pride of their hearts for if they were humble then they would not boast about their leaders but would simply bow in reverent thanks to God for his gracious gifts to the church at Corinth. We know our hearts are proud when we begin to think highly of ourselves and place ourselves above others. When we begin to think that our task in the church is so much more important than others and when we begin to see ourselves as indispensable to this church or any other church. Every member of this church is vital we have been given gifts by God to be used in this church for the benefit of his people and for the glory of God. In that sense you are indispensable.

But we must not think that we are indispensable in the sense that no one could do what you do for when the Lord decides to take us to be with him, and then he will simply raise up someone else and equip them with the gifts to fill the gaps.

Paul wanted the church to learn this point; he wanted them to understand how serious their sin of pride was that so he drives home the point with some pointed sarcasm (v 8). To unmask the conceit of the church at Corinth he heaps upon them artificial praise. He tells the Corinthians that they are great and wonderful, they have every good thing, they are wealthy and they are like kings.

They had it all they had arrived. Now apart from the context the Corinthians would have taken Paul's words at face value for this is exactly what they thought about themselves. They considered themselves to be rich and in need of nothing however if only they could see their true position and see their wretched and misery condition. They were self-satisfied as far as they were concerned there seems to be no struggles in the Christian life. By looking and listening to these Corinthians you would think that there were no sacrifices to be made in the Christian life or no difficulties. You would think that the Christian life is one of ease and constant enjoyment. The Corinthian's were acting as if the kingdom of Christ had already triumphed to the extent that there were no more battles to be fought.

How can they think like this; are they not living in the real world? Paul says that he wishes that it was the case for then he too would be like them reigning as kings having all that you want and being satisfied. Now the reason why they were wrong in their thinking is because of their proud hearts they were full of themselves, their own gifting and abilities.

They are presenting the Christian life as if God doesn't want them to suffer or make sacrifices but always to be robust in health and be wealthy. You find this sort of teaching and thinking on our television screens. There are plenty of people on that channel telling you that the Christian life is all about health and wealth and if you do not possess it then you need more faith and if you send them some money you will be displaying faith and therefore on your way to being blessed by God. Such teaching starts with a heart full of pride. But the Christian life is a struggle a battle against our sinful nature and against the Devil himself and anyone who tells you otherwise is simply being deceived by someone whose heart is full of pride.

Paul longs for the day when it is not a struggle but at present he and the Corinthians must continue to struggle against sin and the powers of darkness.

But now Paul gives us the contrast between the Corinthians conceit and the Apostles Humility.

## 2. THE APOSTLES HUMILITY (vs. 9-13)

Paul confesses here that he or the other apostles were not finding the Christian life easy. Paul knew that the battle was far from over victory was won but the full reality of the victory of Christ on the cross has not yet been received in its fullness. While the Corinthian's were playing the part of conquering kings Paul says that the apostles were like men condemned to death they had been made a spectacle to the world both to angels and to men (v 10).

Now let me try to explain these verses clearly to you for they can be a little difficult and we need to know something of the culture and practise of the time when Paul is writing this letter. When a Roman General won a victory it was celebrated by what was called a 'triumph.' The General would enter the city in great military splendour leading his Officers and troops.

Behind those would follow a group of prisoners in chains with the conquered King and his Officers prominently displayed for all to see and mock. The prisoners were under the sentence of death and would be taken into the arena to fight with wild beasts. That is the spectacle to which Paul is referring to here. In the spiritual battle that he was fighting he was considered to be that sort of captive, that sort of conquered prisoner condemned to death.

I like James Moffatt translation here, which says "God means us apostles to come in at the very end like doomed gladiators in the arena." That how Paul sees the Christian life there is nothing glamorous or easy about being a prisoner about to enter the arena to wrestle with wild beasts. Whereas the Corinthian's see themselves as Kings reigning Paul sees himself like a man condemned to die.

Paul knew that the Christian life is a life of servanthood and humility, a life that is so unlike the world that it constantly runs the risk of death. Paul experienced times of ridicule, he was spat upon, imprisoned, mocked and generally he was treated like a prisoner. But then Paul knew that this is the nature of the Christian pathway. Paul then calls himself a fool for Christ for that is how the Corinthians considered him (v 10).

The Corinthians wanted glory and honour and worldly recognition for they loved human wisdom. They could not think of the Christian life as one of foolishness and weakness and without honour. But that is exactly how the world viewed Paul and the apostles that is how the world regards Christians in general. But the church at Corinth could not think of themselves in such terms they preferred to see themselves as wise strong and honoured (v 10).

But the reality is that Paul and his colleagues faced many difficulties and were seen as fools for Christ. They experienced times of hunger, times when they were poorly clothed and times when they were roughly treated and were homeless. The apostles were being treated like slaves while the Corinthian believers considered themselves to be Kings. Paul worked hard as an apostle (v 12), he worked with his hands, often manual work was seen as only for slaves but Paul was not ashamed to be considered a slave for he was a slave for Christ. Therefore he would endure whatever was necessary for Christ's sake and would do any work that needed to be done for the Lord.

He handled every situation that he found himself in with remarkable grace when he was cursed he responded with blessing, when he was persecuted he responded with endurance when he was slandered, he answered kindly. In fact they have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. The word refers to the dregs left at the bottom of a cup or dish after it has been washed.

That is how the world viewed Paul and the rest of the Apostles but the Christians at Corinth were not prepared to be considered as scum instead they wanted to be considered as on top of the world, as Kings.

The point that Paul is making is that if one is willing to allow oneself to be considered scum by this world and to endure all that this world throws at us then such an attitude will mean that there is no pride in our hearts. If we think that the Christian life is easy and comfortable then this is a sure sign that we are proud. Every serious minded Christian knows that living in this world as a Christian will mean there will be times of real difficulty and trial and hardship and persecution. Times when we are considered to be fools, times when we are seen as scum but we must not resent being seen in such a light for we are only fools and scum to this world but to Christ we are precious.

But being precious to Him does not mean an easy life. The Christian life is a difficult life for it is going against the world and its trends. But we will overcome if we keep looking to Christ and keep trusting in Him and keep on being prepared to be slaves for Christ. Once we feel that our treatment as Christians is unfair then you can be sure that pride has risen in our hearts and needs to be dealt with by the mercy and grace of God.

Therefore as I finish let us have a true perspective of ourselves, let us see ourselves, as slaves of Christ and such a life will mean being treated like a slave by this world but let's remember that such treatment often keeps us humble and dependant upon the Lord. The fact that we get it so easy as Christians in our land can lead us to being proud and self sufficient which will lead us to having the wrong view about ourselves and about the Christian life. Are you struggling in the Christian life then don't worry for that is exactly how it is suppose to be. Keep relying upon the grace of God everyday and that in effect will keep us humble in heart.

Amen