

The Imperfect Church – 7
The Borrowed Church
1 Corinthians 3:18-4:13

Introduction

Let me catch us up to where we are in 1 Corinthians. The fascination with human wisdom, cutting-edge knowledge, wealth, and sophistication of this world-influencing city had begun to infect the church, making it indistinguishable from the world.

These Christians had been saved out of that context but had not severed ties with its influence. Now, this church thinks of themselves as higher than they ought. Paul effectively confronts these realities by reminding them of the Gospel (God's mystery) and its contradiction to the world. They have a choice to make: will they continue to divide up into factions to gain power (like the world), and build their life on the wisdom of this world...or will they stay grounded on the foundation of the Gospel as revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ? Paul now brings these arguments to a convicting conclusion.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23 – **18 Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say,**

**"He traps the wise
in the snare of their own cleverness."**

20 And again,

**"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise;
he knows they are worthless."**

21 So don't boast about following a particular human leader. For everything belongs to you— 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Peter, or the world, or life and death, or the present and the future. Everything belongs to you, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

"Stop deceiving yourselves" ...that's exactly what this church was. Deceived. They thought they were more important than they were. They thought they needed to fight to get what they needed. They hadn't been deceived by any outside teaching or heresy, but by their own sinful hearts. And it was all-encompassing...the word means they were deceived "to the full." The person you are most capable of being deceived by is you. Because our sin of pride is our foremost sin, we tend to view ourselves as the standard for everyone else. All others should be like me, talk like me, think like me, live like me. And if they do, the world will be a better place. That's deception.

“If you think you are wise by this world’s standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise.” Here is the correction to the deception. You need to become a fool (Gk. moron) by the world’s standards. Meaning you need to build your life on what God considers wise, not what the world considers wise, and what God considers wise, the world considers foolish.

1 Corinthians 1:18 - ¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.

You can either live in the “wisdom” of the unsaved world or you can be considered foolish by the world and live in God’s wisdom. 3:19-20 - ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, “He traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness.”

²⁰ And again,
“The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise;
he knows they are worthless.”

Then he will apply that great truth to their specific context...don’t just stop deceiving yourselves, stop dividing yourselves. Stop maneuvering in these petty power plays to gain whatever it is you’re trying to gain. In Christ, you aren’t missing out on anything. 3:21b-22 - For everything belongs to you—²² whether Paul or Apollos or Peter, or the world, or life and death, or the present and the future. Everything belongs to you... You already have all that you need. Why act like the world to squabble and argue and divide (dishonoring and destroying the church in the process) so you can get more. Doesn’t the world live for more?

Matthew 6:31-33 - ³¹ “So don’t worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’ ³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. ³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

As Paul ends chapter 3 he introduces us to a great truth that is going to guide the rest of our text in the first half of chapter 4, a truth that all churches must learn. You may have everything, but it is not because you have achieved it, earned it, or power-broked to get it. All that you have was given to you. 3:22b-23 - Everything belongs to you, ²³ and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Yes, you have it all, everything belongs to you...but you belong to Christ, and he was sent by God. Paul is reminding us that God is the source of all things. God has graciously delivered and, through Christ, we have it all.

Ephesians 1:3 – ³ All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.

Here is how we will say it...you are borrowed. Everything you have is borrowed. Yes, in Christ, you have all things. But they all are from him, and you belong to him. This borrowed idea is the thread that Paul will weave through the next several verses that will frame up what it looks like to live out this reality:

1 Corinthians 4:1-7 - So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's mysteries. ² Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. ³ As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. ⁵ So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. ⁶ Dear brothers and sisters, I have used Apollos and myself to illustrate what I've been saying. If you pay attention to what I have quoted from the Scriptures, you won't be proud of one of your leaders at the expense of another. ⁷ For what gives you the right to make such a judgment? What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?

The centerpiece of the passage is the end of v.7b - *What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?* It's all from him, we dare not forget. Forgetting that truth, or ignoring that truth, is what gets churches in trouble.

Richard Hays – “God is sovereign over all creation and all time. The sooner that truth sinks in, the sooner they will begin to live in the real world rather than in the utopian fantasy of their own wisdom...We all belong to God; if we believed that and acted on it, it would simplify our lives enormously—and, at the same time, heal our divisions.”¹

TS – So how does one live out the reality of God's sovereignty over creation and their own lives, acknowledging that all they have is merely borrowed from the one who owns it all? Simple outline: Serve Faithfully, Suffer Faithfully.

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 61,64.

1. SERVE FAITHFULLY

4:1 - So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's mysteries.

We are "mere servants of Christ." And that is not a mere statement. The word he uses for 'servant' here is an interesting one. *Hyperetes* literally translates as "under-rower." In the great war ships of the times, the boats were powered by large oars coming out of the boat on the lower levels near the waterline. The men who rowed were not the captain of the ship, he was above them directing them. Their job wasn't to be in charge, their job was to row at their Captain's command. Literally as low as you can go on the ship.

These "mere servants of Christ" are also "put in charge" (we will talk about that one in a minute) of "explaining God's mysteries."

Remember, God's 'mystery' is simply Paul's way of referring to the Gospel. No one is smart enough to figure out God's plan to save sinners. No amount of wisdom and intelligence can save. 1:21 -

²¹ Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe.

If you are going to serve faithfully then you are going to share the gospel. Those two things go hand in hand. And that makes perfect sense...if you know that God is sovereign and is the only way for people to be saved from their sin and rescued from an eternity in Hell, the only logical choice is to share the gospel. If you know that people can never be saved on their own, will never be able to come to the gospel without divine intervention, then you'll share the gospel.

4:2 - ² Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. This is the second time he has used this phrase "put in charge." We may see that and puff out our chests a bit. That's right, we are in charge. But that isn't Paul's intent here. The word he uses for "in charge as a manager" is the word for steward. It literally translates as "house slave." He means this: you are a servant who is commissioned to serve your Master and share his good news. Again, notice the borrow language..." put in charge" not inherently awesome and worthy of power. Who owns the house you are the house-slave of? You are the manager, not the owner.

Paul will then give us a compelling reason to serve the Lord and share the gospel (an ultimately compelling reason): judgement is coming. V. 3 - "it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you." That phrase is a superlative, meaning "It literally could not matter less to me" that you may

evaluate me. He isn't trying to be a jerk. He is simply acknowledging that judgment is coming, and it is not coming from other people. He even says in v. 3 that he doesn't trust his own judgement. Though his conscience is clear, that doesn't mean he is innocent. Which is a critical point...just because you may think something is right doesn't make it right. Just because you think something isn't wrong doesn't make it not wrong. We aren't the standard. V. 4b-5 - *It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. ⁵ So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.*

Why serve the Lord and share the gospel faithfully? Because the owner of the house is coming back and on that day we will not be held accountable for the level of our success in life or business, our accumulated wealth, or even our success at church growth or evangelism. We will be held accountable for our faithfulness in doing what the Lord has commanded us to do. Faithfulness, not success. Faithfulness, not success. Churches need to have that mantra emblazoned all around them. Faithfulness, not success.

2. SUFFER FAITHFULLY

This is where it gets a bit dicey. When Paul asks this central defining question in v. 7 - *What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?* He isn't only talking about all the good things we have that we need to acknowledge are from the Lord's hands. He will now go on and include the other side of life, the hard times, as something that also comes from the Lord's hands.

1 Corinthians 4:8-13 - *⁸ You think you already have everything you need. You think you are already rich. You have begun to reign in God's kingdom without us! I wish you really were reigning already, for then we would be reigning with you. ⁹ Instead, I sometimes think God has put us apostles on display, like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die. We have become a spectacle to the entire world—to people and angels alike.*

¹⁰ Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed. ¹¹ Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home. ¹² We work wearily with our own hands to earn our living. We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. ¹³ We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash—right up to the present moment.

Notice again their self-deception. "You think you already have all these great things. You don't need God. You're already amazing." Jesus condemned the same self-righteous, arrogant attitude in the Church in Laodicea. Revelation 3:15-17 - ¹⁵ "I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! ¹⁶ But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth! ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

Instead, he says, "God has put us Apostles on display." Who did this? Where did this come from? We are like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die. He is referencing the Roman procession called the "triumph." When Roman generals won a great victory, a parade was thrown in their honor as they paraded through Rome's streets surrounded by cheers and adoration. At the end of the processional would be this little group of captives, prisoners of war, and they would be taken to the coliseum to be fed to the lions or killed in the gladiator battles. Here is Paul's message: You think you're up there in front as the general, barking orders and leading the victory processional. We apostles, mere servants, are at the back. God is bringing this suffering into my life to use me as an example. In v. 10-13 he used a number of images to describe what the Lord is doing in his life...look like a fool, weak, ridiculed, hungry and thirsty, not enough clothes to keep warm, beaten, homeless, weary, cursed, abused, slandered. Then he says "we are treated like the world's garbage" the word he uses was used to refer to the nasty scrapings from the bottom of a dirty cooking pot. He says we are "like everybody's trash" a word used to refer to dirt on the bottom of your shoes.

This, Paul says, also comes from God. Contrary to popular Christian opinion today, and contrary to the supposed "prosperity gospel" (which is no gospel at all), God is not only interested in your success, helping you achieve the American Dream, your portfolio, and physical health. God is concerned about his own glory, not yours.

So to be faithful is to suffer well. To accept what the Lord brings into our lives that aren't all flowers and unicorns. Martin Luther, the great theologian of the Protestant Reformation contrasted what he called the Theology of Glory (success, achievement), which the Corinthians clearly lived by, with the Theology of the Cross, which is what Paul models here. Luther wrote, "God is not to be found except in sufferings and in the cross" (*The Heidelberg Disputation*, sect. 21, p. 291).²

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 77.

Those of you who have suffered know it as a “terrible blessing.” While you never would have planned it or asked for it, God did something in you and through you that he could not have done in any other way. His presence is felt more closely (Ps. 23 – I have no fear in the valley of the shadow of death, for you are with me). His comfort is more tangible (2 Cor. 1 – your comforts are so immense they overflow). Christlikeness is more real (Is. 53 – suffering servant, despised and rejected).

Philippians 1:29 - ²⁹ For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. “Privilege” is the Gk. word *epicharisthe*...literally “graced” to you to suffer. These are also gifts from his hand (directly or at least allowed) that we are to steward well.

ILL – many of you remember my friend Brandon who preached here in October of 2017 and did our marriage conference. A great friend and preacher who has been my partner in sermon writing for over 15 years. This past August we were at a cabin to plan the 2019 sermon calendar. He was complaining for those few days that his shoulder was hurting, must have slept on it wrong. The night he went home it got worse and he went to the ER. By the next morning, at the age of 39, he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia. For the last four months of last year he endured terrible treatments in radiation and chemotherapy, all scheduled around the birth of his fourth child. In January he had a bone marrow transplant and was in isolation away from his family for two months. Thankfully he is in recovery and in remission. In February I was able to spend a day with him while he was still in isolation. While we were there we looked at this passage together since I was preaching it soon. The next week he sent me an article he wrote that is soon to be published. Here is part of what he said:

“Paul’s view of stewardship included his suffering. When he and his traveling companions lacked the basic necessities of life, their resolve to keep going was a matter of stewardship. When they worked hard to spread the Gospel message, their perseverance was an act of stewardship. When people said evil and untrue things about Paul and his preaching, his response to their insults was an act of stewardship. By sharing this view of his hardships with us, Paul presents us with one of the most beautiful and difficult truths about our own suffering: Suffering is a matter of stewardship.

Like I said, that’s a difficult truth to hear – particularly when we’re in the middle of suffering. Yet, we would all have to admit that our suffering is, at the very least, something that our sovereign God has allowed into our lives. That means it’s something we need to handle with care. We can’t just dismiss our suffering as an anomaly or as something that wasn’t supposed

to happen. We have to approach it as something that has been given to us for some reason. We have to approach it as though it has a purpose.

In doing that, we discover the beautiful part of that truth. Our suffering is not meaningless. Our hardships are not hollow and empty. We can find something – some meaning and purpose – in the middle of them. More than that, we can find Someone in the midst of them. The God who brought us to this moment is in this moment with us. The Master has not left His stewards on their own. Even in the midst of the trial, even in the darkest night and the deepest pain, He is there with us. The God who went to the cross – the “emblem of suffering and shame” – isn’t going to back away from us in the midst of our suffering. Indeed, if the cross shows us anything, it’s that He’s right there in the mess with us. If that’s true, then Paul was right...Suffering is stewardship.”

All we have is from God. He is the source of all things. Our job is to be faithful with what has been entrusted to us, no matter what it is that has been entrusted to us. Our life is borrowed. Our church is borrowed. It’s all His. In Hope, we look forward to the day he returns, when we will take all he’s given and place it at his feet. And may we hear those words from Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Here is how Brandon ends the article, and it’s fitting to end the sermon with it: “One of the hardest parts of suffering comes from the uncertainty it causes. We rarely know how things are going to turn out. Even now, I have no idea what the outcome of my journey with leukemia will be. Will there be remission or relapse? There’s no way for me to know how this ends. And yet, the Bible assures us that we do know how it ends. As Revelation 21:4 reminds us, we are destined for a world with no more “death or mourning or crying or pain.” We are headed for a world without suffering! God has promised that our eternal stories will not be dominated by what we suffer here. Instead, we are looking forward to a new world – a better world. In our darkest days, that may be the only hope we have. As it turns out, it’s the only hope that we need. One day, we get to take all the suffering and pain – all the cancer, the Alzheimer’s, the broken bodies and the hurt hearts – and we get to set them at the feet of Jesus. On that day, He’s going to repair and restore us far more than any other doctor could. No matter what, our suffering isn’t terminal. We are merely its stewards, and our Master ultimately gets the final say.”

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