

Day 1 – Introduction to the Text

1 Cor 3:18-23

Pastor Steve asked his pastor, Paul Burleson, to come and preach for our Harvest Day celebration this year and he will be preaching on 1 Corinthians 3:21-23. However, 1 Cor 3:18-23 is the complete unit, so I thought it would be appropriate if we covered the entire passage for this week's study.

In 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, Paul is bringing the argument he began in 1:10 to a close. The Corinthians were guilty of boasting in church leaders and in their wisdom. The Corinthians were each claiming allegiance to a particular leader in the church and promoting their brand of teaching as authoritative above all others. Beginning in 1:10, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to stop dividing the church into factions based on leaders. Paul's point is that instead of limiting themselves by following only one church leader, they should recognize that there are multiple benefits to having several leaders within one body in Christ.

Paul also addresses the Corinthians reliance on wisdom beginning in 1:18. Apparently the Corinthians cherished wisdom as it relates to the world. Some teachers had come to Corinth after Paul left and claimed that Paul's words lacked wisdom because he preached about a crucified Messiah. But Paul argues that the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

In his book *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, D.A. Carson comments on 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, noting especially the contrast between Godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. He writes, "The world pants after strong leaders, but leaders in the church must first of all be servants of the Lord Christ. The world parades its heroes and gurus; Christians remember that God loves to choose the weak and the lowly and the despised—the nobodies—so that no one may boast before him. The world tries to impress with its rhetoric and sophistication, cherishing form more than content. The apostles of Jesus Christ prize truth above style and quietly refuse to endorse any form that may prove so attractive, even diversionary, that the centrality of gospel truth is jeopardized" (84-85).

Memory Verses: 1 Corinthians 3:21-23

Day 2 – What Does the Text Say?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

1. What does Paul command us not to do in verse 18?
2. What does God consider the wisdom of this world (v19)?
3. According to Paul, what does God do to those who think they are wise (v19)?
4. Why is God not concerned with the reasoning of the wise (v20)?
5. Why should we not boast in people (v21)?
6. What things belong to all Christians (v22)?
7. Why do all things belong to those who are in Christ (v23)?

Day 3 – What Does the Text Mean?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23 again

Verse 18: *...thinks that he is wise in this age...* “Paul’s point is that to be wise by the standards of this age is nothing to boast about. This phrase recalls the extended argument in 1:18–3:4, that the cross pronounces a verdict of judgment on ‘the wisdom of this age’ and ‘the rulers of this age’ (2:6). *This age* refers both to a stage in history, in contradistinction to the age to come, and a world order that stands in opposition to God” (Ciampa and Rosner, 162).

He must become foolish... “Paul continues the strong tone of his advice, using the imperative form of the verb to say (lit.), ‘let him (or her) become foolish, in order that he (or she) may become wise.’ The statement stands on its head the value system that Paul opposed in Corinth. Thinking themselves wise, some Corinthians were fools, for their wisdom caused them to scoff at or ignore the wisdom of God that was revealed in the cross of Christ. By embracing the seemingly foolish wisdom of God, they would become fools to the world but wise in the sight of God” (Soards, 80).

Verse 19: *...He is THE ONE...* Paul emphasizes his point by quoting from Job 5:13. “The unit in which the verse appears, part of the first speech of Eliphaz, reinforces the idea of God’s superiority to human wisdom and strength. In a passage depicting the God who does ‘great, unsearchable and marvelous things’ (5:8–9), Job 5:8–16 sets up an opposition between ‘the wise’ and ‘the poor.’ The passage in question develops the theme of God’s deliverance of the latter (5:15–16: ‘he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth ... so the poor have hope’) and his frustration of the former (5:14: ‘the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end’)” (Ciampa and Rosner, 163).

...WHO CATCHES THE WISE... “The verb ‘catch’ in Job comes from the language of hunting, so that Paul’s employment of this particular verse presents a divine irony. As people craftily try to avoid God’s will and work through their involvement with ‘wisdom,’ God uses their very craftiness to capture them; for as they posture themselves before God and humanity as the wise, such persons turn out to be real fools” (Soards, 81).

Verse 20: THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS... “Psalm 94 stresses that in spite of manipulative and corrupt leadership by those in authority (Ps 94:5–7, 16), the ‘schemes’ of these human persons fail because their best ‘thinkers’ are fallible (Ps 94:11). Since advisers are clearly in view here, Paul’s use of τῶν σοφῶν [the wise] simply explicates their deliberative and advisory role as against τῶν ἀνθρώπων [the men], which stresses their mere humanness” (Thiselton, 323).

Verse 21: So then... “The opening words of the verse, the conjunction *so then* followed by an imperative, are a common construction in the letter. Paul uses it to introduce a summary command or exhortation that emerges from his previous discussion. Thus, in 3:21 Paul repeats his request in 1:10 that the Corinthians be united by calling on them not to form factions around their favorite leaders. In fact, this verse sums up succinctly both the heart and one of the main grounds of Paul’s appeal: ‘Stop boasting in your leaders, as if you belong to them, for if anything, they belong to you!’” (Ciampa and Rosner, 165).

Verse 22: whether Paul or Apollos...all things belong to you... “The examples of ‘all things’ that Paul lists fall into three categories: a triplet of leaders (*Paul, Apollos, Cephas*); a triplet of powers relating to this life (*the world, life, death*); and a doublet with respect to time (*the present and the future*). The Corinthians had claimed that they belonged to particular leaders (1:11; cf. 3:5–7). In a powerful instance of ‘Pauline redefinition,’ the apostle takes the same vocabulary and phrases used by the Corinthians, but generates an entirely different meaning: *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas ... all are yours*. Paul, Apollos, and Cephas actually belong to the Corinthians because, as servants of Christ (3:5), they are engaged in the service of building the temple (i.e., the Corinthians; 3:16–17)” (166).

Verse 23: and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. “...because they belong to Christ and because Christ belongs to God, ‘all things’ belong to them, since all things ultimately belong to God. Only as they are **of Christ** are they related to ‘all things’ in such a way that they are free from the need to attach themselves to someone or something so that they can find identity and status (Soards, 82-83).

Day 4 – What Difference Does the Text Make?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23 again.

1. In what ways can Christians be influenced by the wisdom of the world?
2. Why is it easy for us to get caught up in worldly philosophies?
3. Do you think Christians today boast in church leaders? Why or why not?
4. In what way does knowing that all things belong to you because you belong to Christ, affect your decision making?

Day 5 – What Must I Change?

Review and reflect on the passage

1. What is one way you can point other people to Christ?
2. How do you plan to avoid succumbing to the wisdom of this age?
3. How can you use this passage to encourage other people in your life?

Bibliography

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update.

Ciampa, Roy E., and Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.

Soards, Marion L. *1 Corinthians*. Understanding the Bible Commentary Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.