

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Shun Worldly Wisdom**

*1 Corinthians 3:18-23*

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# Shun Worldly Wisdom

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is a clear understanding that God's wisdom is superior to the world's wisdom. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Shun Worldly Wisdom."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23:

**<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." <sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Corinthians 3:18–23)**

## Introduction

A story is told about a theological student who came to the great nineteenth century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon one day. The student was very concerned that he could not understand the meaning of certain verses in the Bible.

Apparently, Spurgeon replied kindly but firmly, "Young man, allow me to give you this word of advice. Give the Lord credit for knowing things you don't understand."<sup>1</sup>

We all struggle to understand certain verses or parts of the Bible, don't we? And God's wisdom is far superior to ours, isn't

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).

it? Job said in Job 12:13, “With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding.”

When the Bible talks about wisdom it is talking about living in light of God’s truth. Wisdom is the “ability to judge correctly and to follow the best course of action, based on knowledge and understanding.” The apostle Paul declared that the message of the cross is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. But to those who believe, said Paul, this “foolishness of God” is in fact “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18–25).

Against the wisdom of God Paul contrasted “the wisdom of this world” (1:20; 3:19), “human wisdom” (2:4), “the wisdom of men” (2:5), “the wisdom of this age” (2:6), and “man’s wisdom” (2:13).

The biblical concept of wisdom, therefore, is quite different from the world’s view of wisdom, which sought through philosophy and human rational thought to determine the mysteries of existence and the universe. The first principle of biblical wisdom is that people should humble themselves before God in reverence and worship, obedient to his commands.<sup>2</sup>

In the passage we are looking at today (3:18-23), the apostle Paul brings his first argument to a conclusion. He wants the Corinthian believers to understand that God’s wisdom is superior to the world’s wisdom.

## Lesson

And so, in today’s lesson we learn that God’s wisdom is superior to the world’s wisdom.

Let’s use the following outline for today’s lesson:

1. The Deception of Believers (3:18-20)
2. The Discipleship of Believers (3:21-23)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted for this outline to John G. Butler, *Analytical Bible Expositor: I & II Corinthians* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009), 33-36.

## I. The Deception of Believers (3:18-20)

First, let's notice the deception of believers.

Paul has just warned the believers in the church at Corinth about holding a wrong view of the ministry and particularly of church leadership. Now he cautions them about deception. The deception he cautions them about is a wrong view of wisdom.

### A. *The Command about Deception (3:18a)*

First, observe the command about deception.

Paul said in verse 18a, **“Let no one deceive himself.”**

Someone has said, “The one who can deceive us the quickest is our own self.”<sup>4</sup> We are especially prone to deception about our assessment of our wisdom. We think we are particularly smart when in fact we may be really dumb.

The Corinthian believers had fooled themselves into thinking that they were doing the right thing by exalting worldly wisdom to support their positions against each other. In their culture such behavior seemed reasonable. After all, everyone else in Corinth threw his or her support behind one of the great philosophers of the day. So, why not do as all the other Corinthians do and support either Paul or Apollos or Peter?

### B. *The Cause of Deception (3:18b)*

Second, observe the cause of deception.

Paul said in verse 18b, **“If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age. . . .”**

The Greek word for **age** means “the system of practices and standards associated with secular society (that is, without reference to any demands or requirements of God).”<sup>5</sup> And so Paul challenged the Corinthians to realize that though they thought they

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<sup>4</sup> John G. Butler, *Analytical Bible Expositor: I & II Corinthians* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 507.

were wise, they were not in fact taking God into account in their thinking.

This has been a very common problem throughout the ages. People are wonderfully converted to Christ. They become part of the church. The church gets established. Over the years it may even flourish in gospel priorities. But then, things seem to become rather routine, rote, and ordinary. After some time others come along and they challenge the old way of thinking. There are new ways to think about God and spiritual matters. *After all*, they say, *we are now living in an enlightened age*. So, in comes higher criticism. In comes liberal theology. In comes liberation theology. In comes prosperity theology. In comes everything but gospel theology. And once again people think that they are **wise in this age**.

C. *The Countering of Deception (3:18c)*

Third, observe the countering of deception.

Paul said in verse 18c, “. . . **let him become a fool that he may become wise.**”

The Greek word for **fool** is the word from which we get the English word “moron.” In this case Paul does not mean that we should become stupid in life in order to become wise, but it means that we are to value worldly wisdom that leaves out God and the Scriptures as moronic. This becoming a **fool** is simply another way of saying that we must renounce worldly wisdom if we would be wise in the wisdom of God.

The great theologian Charles Hodge put it this way:

We must be empty in order to be filled. We must renounce our own righteousness, in order to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We must renounce our own strength, in order to be made strong. We must renounce our own wisdom, in order to be truly wise. This is a universal law.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 60.

The world does not understand God and the gospel of God. So, they mock Christians who believe God and the gospel of his grace. You see this on TV. The only group in our society that can be mocked and ridiculed is Christians. No one stands up for Christians because those who are not Christians agree that Christianity is “stupid.” Oh, they may not agree that it is right or nice to pick on someone else, but they actually don’t subscribe to the truth about Christianity themselves.

And so what often happens is that Christians capitulate in order to be accepted by others. They want some respectability. They also want to be seen as wise in the eyes of the world.

But Paul says that we must not worry about what the world thinks of us. Let the world think of us what it will. Let us be thought of as fools when we believe the wisdom of God that is revealed to us in the gospel of his grace.

*D. The Condemning of Deception (3:19-20)*

And fourth, observe the condemning of deception.

Paul condemns the wisdom of this world, the worldly wisdom that causes all this deception.

1. The Scorning in the Condemning (3:19a)

First, we see the condemning of deception in the scorning in the condemning.

Paul said in verse 19a, “**For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.**”

The **wisdom of this world** that leaves out God and the gospel is given much praise by the world. But God’s assessment of it is that it is **folly**.

2. The Support for the Condemning (3:19b-20)

And second, we see the condemning of deception in the support for the condemning.

Paul gave two Scripture passages to support his argument that the wisdom of this world is folly with God.

*First, Paul quoted Job 5:13 to support his argument that the wisdom of this world is folly with God.* Paul said in verse 19b, “**He catches the wise in their craftiness.**” In this passage Eliphaz said that God was like a hunter, catching Job as he caught the wise in their craftiness. Job was caught in the trap of his own human reasoning rather than understanding and accepting the wisdom of God (cf. Job 42:3).

When people operate according to the wisdom of the world they think that they are enlightened. For example, that is what is behind the homosexual agenda. The wisdom of the world says that homosexuality is an enlightened way of understanding our sexuality. We no longer live in the dark ages of defining marriage as being only between one man and one woman. No, the new worldly wisdom teaches that homosexuality is the enlightened position. But God **catches the wise in their craftiness**, and homosexuality will eventually be shown to produce disastrous results for society.

*Second, Paul quoted Psalm 94:11 to support his argument that the wisdom of this world is folly with God.* Paul said in verse 20, “**The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.**” In this passage God asserts that he knows what the wise are thinking, and he declares that their thoughts are futile. In other words, God mocks those who think they are safe when they rebel against him.

I think of the so called “new atheists” in this regard. In recent years there has been a resurgence of atheism. The outspoken voices for the new atheists are Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others. They love to debate Christians on the existence of God and other Christian issues. Whenever I listen to them or read their arguments, however, I cannot help but notice a certain arrogance as they appear to be so sophisticated. They are wise in their own eyes. And yet, I remind myself that “**the Lord**

**knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”**

## **II. The Discipleship of Believers (3:21-23)**

And so, having looked at the deception of believers, let us now, in the second place, look at the discipleship of believers.

Believers are disciples of Jesus Christ. However, the Corinthian Christians were making themselves disciples of human leaders. Paul again brings up the subject of division in the closing verses of this chapter.

### *A. The Precept for Discipleship (3:21a)*

First, observe the precept for discipleship.

Paul said in verse 21a, **“So let no one boast in men.”**

The Corinthian Christians were choosing one of the leaders as the one they thought was the greatest. They were boasting in men, such as Paul, Apollos, and Peter.

To **boast in men** is to set yourself up for disappointment. Why? Because men are human. They are sinful. They are not perfect. They make mistakes. They do not always do the right thing.

But the Lord does not fail. He is not only human; he is also divine. He is perfect. He never makes mistakes. He always does the right thing.

Men should never be glorified. Only God should be glorified. And so all our boasting should be in Christ, not in men.

### *B. The Possessions of Discipleship (3:21b-22)*

Second, observe the possessions of discipleship.

Paul said in verse 21b, **“For all things are yours. . . .”**

This is a comprehensive statement. In fact, Paul said it twice, in this verse and in the next. The language of this expression derives from Stoic philosophy. It originally described wisdom as mastery over all that one encounters in life. Paul used this Stoic



saying to encourage the Corinthians to gain a proper, Christ-centered perspective on their lives. If they became people of spiritual wisdom, they would see that everything had been given to them in Christ.

All things are Christ's inheritance, and Christ shares his inheritance with all believers (Ephesians 1:10-14). The gifts that the Corinthian Christians received were boundless.

So, what was included in the possessions of discipleship?

1. The Evangelists Were Included (3:22a)

First, the evangelists were included.

Paul said in verse 22a, “. . . **whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas.**”

These men were merely their “servants for Jesus' sake,” as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5. They were not to be viewed as men seeking a following from groups in the church. They were simply being obedient to the call of God upon their lives and were gifts that God had given to the believers for their edification.

2. The Environment Was Included (3:22b)

Second, the environment was included.

Paul said in verse 22b, “. . . **or the world.**”

The church is the joint-heir with Christ (Romans 8:17) of all that is his, and this includes the **world** and the entire universe.

3. The Existence Was Included (3:22c)

Third, the existence was included.

Paul said in verse 22c, “. . . **or life or death.**”

**Life** is theirs through Jesus Christ. And **death**, as one preacher said, is “the servant to usher me into the presence of the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John G. Butler, *Analytical Bible Expositor: I & II Corinthians* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009), 36.

4. The Events Are Included (3:22d)

And fourth, the events are included.

Paul said in verse 22d, “. . . **or the present or the future.**”

The **present** has to do with God’s providence and the way in which he works out all things for his glory and for the ultimate good of his people. And the **future** has to do with the glorious hope that belongs to believers.

So, Paul is right when he summarizes and says again, at the end of verse 22, “. . . **all are yours.**”

C. *The Position of Discipleship (3:23)*

And third, observe the position of discipleship.

Believers have a distinct and blessed position in being saved.

1. The Savior in the Position (3:23a)

First, notice the Savior in the position.

Paul said in verse 23a, “. . . **and you are Christ’s.**”

When a person receives the gospel, he becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple of Jesus Christ is being a follower of Jesus Christ. Believers now belong to Jesus Christ. We are his blood-bought possession and treasure. We belong to him.

2. The Security in the Position (3:23a)

Second, notice the security in the position.

Paul said in verse 23a, “. . . **and you are Christ’s.**”

I said that Jesus is our Savior. And that we belong to Jesus. That is one of the blessings of salvation.

But, I also want you to notice our security in our salvation. Because we belong to Jesus we are secure for all eternity. The only way a believer can lose his salvation is for Jesus to lose the believ-

er. That, of course, is impossible. There is simply no way for Jesus to lose his own. Once a person becomes a Christian he or she is kept safe for all eternity.

### 3. The Submission in the Position (3:23b)

And third, notice the submission in the position.

Paul said in verse 23b, “. . . **and Christ is God’s.**”

Just as we belong to Jesus, there is a sense in which Jesus belongs to God. Our blessings are absolutely secure because Christ’s position with his Father is absolutely secure.

## Conclusion

There is an old Arab proverb that says:

He that knows not and knows not that he knows not;

He is a fool—shun him!

He that knows not and knows that he knows not;

He is simple—teach him!

He that knows and knows not that he knows;

He is asleep—wake him!

He that knows and knows that he knows;

He is a wise man—follow him!<sup>8</sup>

There is a lot of truth in that proverb. And yet, when it comes to God, the gospel, and eternal issues, the only truth we have is found in the Word of God.

Paul has been teaching the Corinthians—and us—that that God’s wisdom is superior to the world’s wisdom.

Let us embrace the wisdom that God gives us in his Word and let us shun worldly wisdom. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, I thank you for your Word. I thank you for the apostle Paul who had such a keen grasp of your truth. I thank you that he wrote letters to the Corinthians—and to others—for our instruction.

Help us to embrace the wisdom that you reveal to us in your Word. And help us to shun worldly wisdom, which will only lead us down a path of destruction.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, embrace the wisdom of God and shun worldly wisdom!