

## All Things Are Yours

1 Corinthians 3:18-23  
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*<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*

The Corinthian church is in a dangerous, precarious position. Their problems are serious and numerous – confusion over marriage, idolatry, playing favorites according to wealth and class, incest, rampant abuse of spiritual gifts, some are denying Jesus' resurrection, and most significantly, there is division, strife, jealousy, and quarrelling as they reject God's wisdom and embrace worldly wisdom. All of the ink Paul spills in 1 Corinthians is used to correct their error and reestablish them on the firm foundation of Christ, his gospel, and the wisdom and power of God.

The question we must now ask is, "How did the Corinthian church end up in such a dangerous place?" Paul planted the church as a skilled master-builder on the firm foundation of Christ (3:9-10). The church had a good beginning, and there was a time in which everything was going well. But now it is in shambles. How did this happen? What went wrong?

Of course, this is a broad question. Our interest is not merely in the Corinthian church, but with all churches, even our own church. Churches can go downhill very, very quickly. What kinds of real dangers do we face today that may tend to take us down the treacherous path the Corinthians were following?

Think for a moment about all of the blessings we are currently experiencing as a church. Lately, we have had record attendance at our men's and women's Bible studies. Some of our old-timers have told me that in all their years at Calvin PCA they've never seen so many people showing up for Bible studies. That's a good thing! We are currently witnessing, what I hope will prove to be in the long-run, a true renewal of family worship. More than ever our families are regularly worshiping the Lord at home, singing, praying, and studying God's Word together. Most of our young children are learning biblical, God-centered, meaty, life-transforming, reformed doctrine, and this is paying measurable, spiritual dividends. Our children are learning and memorizing the catechisms of our church, and through this they are absorbing truths about God and owning these truths for themselves. This summer we've had rich fellowship at our Covenant Life family ministry: eating, praying, worshiping, studying, and fellowshiping together – just the church being the church! We have new families worshiping with us. Some of our members are zealous evangelists. At the drop of a hat they will talk about Jesus with anybody and everybody. Last week one of our members told me about how he and another member conspired together to get a bible in the hands of a stranger

walking their neighborhoods. Every week people stop me and make it a specific point to tell me how glad they are to be a part of our church. They mention how much they are learning and growing, and I am profoundly encouraged. Our college students tell me they can't wait to get back to Calvin when they are away. On Sunday evenings I am richly blessed as we worship and pray together. As Chris preaches, I am like a sponge, and he is constantly challenging me and chastening me and edifying me as he proclaims Christ in his sermons. I love it! I believe we have a higher percentage of people worshipping on Sunday evenings than ever before.

We could go on and on. There are so many blessings to rejoice in as God is at work among us. Yes, there are challenges. No, not all is going as well as it could. But my sense is that generally we are anxious and willing to grow and change and move forward in the faith, and our challenges pale in comparison with God's blessings.

Now, we rehearse these blessings, not in any way to boast in ourselves, but instead just the opposite, to remind us that although so much is going so well, it doesn't take long, it doesn't take much, for all of it to be derailed and destroyed just like in Corinth. Everything can go haywire in an instant. In most cities throughout the world you can find once thriving churches that are now decimated and destroyed. So our question is especially pertinent and crucial, "What are the greatest dangers that every church faces?"

The answer? You are.

As individual believers we, ourselves, pose the greatest potential threat to this church than anything else. Look at what happened in Corinth. The members of the church deceived themselves, so Paul says in v. 18, "Let no one deceive himself." The members of the church trusted in their own wisdom, so Paul says in vs. 18, "If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise." The members of the church boasted in mere men, so Paul says in v. 21, "So let no one boast in men." They deceived themselves, trusted in their own wisdom, boasted in men, and in doing so they became the single greatest threat to the Corinthian church.

## **Dangerous Church Members**

Friends, the greatest threat to Christ's church is never from without, it is always from within. Think about the periods in history when outside forces conspired to decimate Christ's church. Paul himself tried to do just that in his former life. He zealously persecuted Christ's church, but he was never a real threat to it.<sup>1</sup> In fact he obviously lost that battle! Various Roman emperors zealously persecuted Christ's church, but the church still grew and thrived. Today, in some of the most oppressive regimes in the world, Christ's church is thriving and faithful. The book of Revelation, in fact, was written to Christ's church facing imminent threat of serious persecution. In Revelation, God literally peels back the cover from this world and exposes real reality, true truth. Through magnificent imagery, God makes clear that no matter how powerful the worldly forces that conspire against the church appear, they are already utterly defeated by Christ, and they will do no harm.

The real threat to the church is always from within, from its own members. Every church is full of dangerous people. This was the case in Corinth. They had deceived themselves, and they had become the single greatest threat to their own church. In Acts

20, Paul acknowledges the same as he says to the Ephesian elders, “*from among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). When Paul addresses the serious doctrinal error in Galatia he says, “Who hindered you from obeying the truth...? A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Gal. 5:7,9). In other words, just one person within the church can adversely affect the entire church. The greatest threat to Christ’s church is always from within.

Friends, our own church is full of dangerous people. All of us are dangerous. If you believe that you are not potentially dangerous, then you probably have already deceived yourself and trusted in your own wisdom. Make no mistake... we all have the great potential to be combatants or weapons used against Christ’s church.

Some church members can be like snipers. These have the amazing ability, from a great distance, to slowly, carefully, and systematically pick off and take down a wide variety of the church’s people and programs. Others are stealthy, publicly pleasant, but privately, out of sight, a true marksman doing serious destruction. Some are time bombs, just waiting for the right moment to blow up and lay into someone or some aspect of the church. Some are heat-seeking missiles. These are consumed with a single issue or person. They’ve locked on, fired, and until damage is done they stay locked on to their target, thinking of nothing else. Some are like intercontinental ballistic missiles. These will travel thousands of miles at a moments notice, they will cross continents to do damage if given the opportunity. Some are like drones. They are really flown by someone else. Whatever they say goes. When they pull the trigger, you do the damage. Some members engage in cyber warfare on Facebook or email. Some are like nuclear bombs. Whatever the problem is, whether it is a typo in the bulletin or a decision by the elders, the only thing these know how to do is to explode in a really, really big way.

Without question I myself, as pastor of this church, am the biggest potential threat. I speak publicly more than anybody. I have more responsibility than anybody. Arguably, I have more influence over the church than anybody. I can probably destroy this church a lot more quickly, with a lot less effort, than anybody else.

I am potentially dangerous. We all are potentially dangerous. We must be especially careful to not deceive ourselves. We must forsake our own wisdom. We must never boast in men. Because we are all potentially dangerous and destructive, we must practice great restraint with one another. We must practice mutual patience and forbearance. We must consciously and actively be asking ourselves how we might build up Christ’s church. And we must remember the gravity of Paul’s words in 3:17, “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.”

Our goal is to be Satan’s worst nightmare, not the church’s worst nightmare. We can do this in several ways. First, we can simply heed the biblical calling to grow in grace and truth, and walk in step with God’s Spirit. Paul’s words in Eph. 5:18-21 are a great place to start: “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

We can also build up the church by trusting in God’s wisdom and forsaking the wisdom of the world.

## God's Wisdom vs. Worldly Wisdom: A Case Study

In verses 18-20, Paul repeats the main theme of his argument from these opening chapters. God's wisdom is directly contrary and opposed to the world's wisdom.

**<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" (1 Cor. 3:18-20).**

In order to become vibrant, effective, growing Christians, truly building up Christ's church, we must become fools. That is to say, in all spiritual matters, we must reject the world's wisdom and trust in God's wisdom. Paul makes it clear that the wisdom of the world is folly to the wise. God will catch the worldly wise in their craftiness and bring them to naught. To trust in worldly wisdom is ultimately futile. On the contrary, God's wisdom is grounded in the absurdity of the cross, the foolishness of a weak, suffering, and crucified savior, and *this* wisdom is the source of true life and power. Because God's wisdom is foreign to human minds in every way, it takes the supernatural act of spiritual regeneration for us to receive it.

To get a sense of how extremely contrary God's wisdom is to the wisdom of the world, let's take a moment to do a case study and rigorously apply God's wisdom to the current events of our day. This week a federal court ruled in support of gay marriage in California. If we want to be growing, strong Christians in a growing, strong church, how might we learn to apply God's wisdom to this significant court ruling?

As we measure this judicial ruling by Scripture, the first thing we see is that God's wisdom stands in opposition to the wisdom of the court on this matter. God's Word is crystal clear – homosexuality is a sin, a violation of God's law, and all who practice it and endorse it are themselves deceived. Later in 1 Cor. 6:9, Paul will tell us that those who practice homosexuality will not receive the kingdom of God. Without question, God's wisdom stands in conflict with the world's wisdom, and as God's people, we must speak just as clearly as God's Word does. Homosexuality is a sin.

Now unfortunately, most public discourse from evangelical Christians stops here, but God's wisdom dictates that we go further. God himself has more to say on the issues, and it is here that we start to see that God's wisdom is not only in conflict with the world's wisdom, but often it is in conflict with our own.

In Romans 1, Paul teaches that the abundance of homosexual sin in society is actually God's doing – *not* in the sense that God leads people to sin or tempts them – but in the sense that God himself has removed the restraints from them. He has "given them over," so to speak, to their sin.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore *God gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. <sup>26</sup> For this reason *God gave them up* to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that

are contrary to nature;<sup>27</sup> and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, *God gave them up* to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done (Rom. 1:24-28).

Three times Paul says that God “gave them up” to their sinful passions. In this sense, the prevalence of homosexual behavior in the world is God’s doing. In fact, its prevalence is, according to Paul, part and parcel of God’s judgment against it. While many Christians fret that this judicial ruling is a sign that things are now really out of control, Paul teaches very clearly that the judicial ruling itself is a sign of God’s sovereignty and judgment over sin. God is turning them over to it. He is removing the restraints. He is bringing his judgment.

So God’s wisdom directs us away from being consumed with distress over this judicial ruling, and instead it directs us to rest in, trust in, and even rejoice in God’s sovereignty now openly displayed. Friends, this is indeed contrary to our own wisdom, but it is God’s wisdom.

God’s wisdom also dictates that we, as Christians with Christ being formed within us, must become friends to sinners. That is to say, we ought to be friends to homosexuals. Jesus himself is derided as being a friend to sinners (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34).<sup>2</sup> We must bear that same reproach. If we are going to truly trust in God’s wisdom, we would do well to be known as a church that is a friend to homosexuals. This means that with clarity, love, compassion, gentleness, and all the mercy of God, we identify their sin and speak the gospel to them.

Here we do well to remember how James and John, the “Sons of Thunder,” wanted to call down fire upon the Samaritans who rejected Jesus (Lk. 9:52-55). Jesus rebukes them. Why? Because the door for salvation remained open and his disciples wanted to shut it. We must identify sin, but we must also recognize that today is the day of salvation.

Beloved church, are you a friend to homosexuals? Do you approach them as fellow sinners in need of God’s grace? Do you realize that the wisdom of the world would have you boast in your own self-righteousness and stand proudly over and above men and women who are sinners just like you?<sup>3</sup> Do you pray for them? Do you proclaim the gospel as zealously as you decry their sin? God’s wisdom dictates this.

God’s wisdom also tells us that as long as we are on this earth, we are foreigners and sojourners here. This world is not our home. We are not of this world. Ultimately, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). Therefore, as God’s people we cannot expect this world to look or feel too much like home to us. We cannot expect the world to conform to God’s ways and wisdom, nor ought we, which are foolish by the world’s standards, or expect a “place at the table” in the power structures of this world.

Truly, from a worldly perspective things don’t bode well for Christ’s church in regard to this judicial ruling on homosexual marriage. Part of the judge’s argument read, “Religious beliefs that gay and lesbian relationships are sinful or inferior to heterosexual relationships harm gays and lesbians.” From a worldly perspective, our Christian beliefs have now been officially declared “harmful” to our society.

But friends, we don't live by the standards and wisdom of the world. Thus, even if a wave of public sentiment rises against Christ's church in America, and even if we suffer and are persecuted for following God's wisdom, we must remember that God's church can never truly be harmed by outside forces. We must remember that, historically speaking, God's church often thrives in the midst of persecution. Will it really be a tragedy if our covenant children grow up in a world in which they are hated and legally persecuted against for their biblical stance on homosexuality? Or will it instead be a glorious opportunity for them to zealously lay hold of the faith and forsake worldly ways, wisdom, and power in ways that we, growing up in "Christian America," quite frankly have not done? Friends, my greatest fear for my own children is not that they grow up in a world with legalized gay marriage (as much as we lament that possibility), it is that they grow up in a church that is not built with God's wisdom, with Christ, in all of his worldly weakness and foolishness, as its foundation.

### **All Things Are Yours**

Paul now says, **"So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's"** (3:21-23). While the Corinthians were fighting tooth and nail over which Christian leader to follow, Paul reminds them that all things are theirs, so relax. Instead of fighting and quarreling in human wisdom, rest in and receive what God has given you in Christ.

God has given you Paul. Receive him and benefit from his ministry. God has given you Apollos. Receive him and benefit from his ministry. Stop boasting in men, stop trusting in worldly wisdom and power, and instead start trusting in God and see the reality that he has given you all things. The scope of God's bountiful giving extends even to death itself, so much so that Paul here refers to it as a gift from God. God's wisdom, in conflict with worldly wisdom, says, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Now the utter foolishness of boasting in men, trusting in worldly wisdom, and quarreling with one another has been exposed. God's abundant goodness is enough. His grace is sufficient. His gifts are abundant. His wisdom trumps all.

In Romans 8, Paul elaborates on the far-reaching implications of the truth that God has given "all things" to his people. We end with these glorious words:

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

<sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>

nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

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<sup>1</sup> The zeal, violence, and passion of Paul's former persecuting ways against the church ought not to be underestimated. From verses such as Acts 22:4; 26:11; 1 Cor. 15:9; and Gal 1:13 it is evident that Paul was employing every means possible to eliminate Christ's church. His language in Acts 26:11 captures well his mindset and mission, "in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Jesus' own response to this charge is "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children" (Lk. 7:35). Here again we see God's wisdom standing in direct opposition to the world's wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Just as strongly as God's wisdom speaks against the sin of homosexuality in Romans 1, God's wisdom speaks against the sin of self-righteousness in Romans 2:17-24.