1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5 Sermon Manuscript

“Insufficient in Ourselves…Sufficient in Christ”

Well, Paul has been spending almost 4 chapters on the subject of division and disunity in the church in 1 Corinthians. While there are other subjects like sexual immorality, or the improper use of spiritual gifts, that he deals with, the subject of division and quarrels is arguably the biggest section he devotes space and ink to. Not only does he devote much chapters to this subject, the fact that he start off his epistle with the problem of divisions in the Corinthian church shows that this problem was a priority for Paul to address because it reveals a more deep seated issue embedded in the human heart, that if we get to the root of it, it will help us interpret and handle the rest of the issues talked about in this letter. And the root problem of the issues of boasting and division in the church and of people forming factions saying “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas…” is a lack of trusting in the sufficiency of Christ. You can argue that all the sinful actions a sinner may commit can be traced back to a lack of sufficiency in Jesus Christ and His Word. And when you do not trust in the sufficiency of Jesus for your life, security, and identity, you will end up boasting in other things and other people in this world that you think are sufficient for you. And so throughout our time today, ask yourself these questions, “Is Christ enough for you?” “Is what Christ has done on the cross and Him being raised from the dead on behalf of you, enough for you? Do you trust that the Bible contains everything you need to live a godly and fulfilled life here on earth and into eternity?

So let us begin in verse 18. “*Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise*.” The path to trust wisdom is to become what the world considers as foolish, which is the message of the cross and all that is written in God’s Word. He’s not saying to literally become a fool, in the sinful and negative sense, but to humble oneself according to God’s Word to the point where the world would consider you foolish. For example, the world considers people who ponder about serious and sombering things like death, eternity, funerals, and the like as foolish. But Solomon, in His God given wisdom says actually those who thing about such things seriously are wise. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:2, “*Better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting because that is the end of all mankind, And the living puts this in his heart*.” God’s values and way of living is opposite of the values and way of living of the world. What God considers as foolish, the world thinks as wise. For example, according to Psalm 14:1, God considers those who live as if He didn’t exist as a “fool.” But the world applauds and approves as wise those who hold to a view that you can live however way you want, because there is no God, and there are no consequences. What God considers as wise, the world considers as foolish. For example, God declares in 1 Corinthians that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the epitome of the wisdom of God, but the world considers that foolish and offensive that a whole religion would be formed and based off the sufferings of a condemned criminal on a cross.

That is why verses 19-20 says “*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written “He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness*; and again, “*The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless*.” One of the best illustrations of this is the book of Esther and what happened to Haman who ended up being hanged on his own gallows. Haman was elevated to a high status by King Ahasuerus. He was a narcissist and so infatuated with himself and his glory and he particularly hated the Jews. One day he got extremely angry when Mordecai, a Jew, did not bow down to him as the king decreed. But it wasn’t only Mordecai, Haman was secretly planning to destroy all the Jews. Thinking he was wise and crafty, little did he know that his so called crafty plan would end up falling back onto of him. In a number of reversals, God flipped the script on Haman and He ordained the circumstances of the event in such a way that so that Haman ended up angering king Ahasuerus and he ended up being hanged on the very gallows that he made at his home that was meant for Mordecai. He had no fear for the God of Israel, thinking that God would allow for the eradication of His people when He promised that one day they would have a land, seed, and blessing.

Verse 21 “*So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”* What does he mean by the statement “*For all things belong to you*?” Well Paul is switching gears here a little bit. Not only is he saying that we shouldn’t boast in men because the wisdom of men is foolishness to God and men typically boast in themselves or in others. He is also saying that we should not boast in men because we have been given all things imaginable in Christ. In other words, there is no reason to boast in Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or whoever else, as if we would be insufficient if we didn’t have them in our lives because God has given all of heaven and earth at our disposal. Because we are His children, because we are in the kingdom of God, because God loves us, and because God is working all things for good, including even our sufferings and death, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, we have everything we need in Christ! Not even the most dreadful evils of sin and death that mankind are terrified of can take away our sufficiency in Christ.

The reason why the Corinthians were boasting and placing their identity in certain leaders of the church is because they were not finding their sufficiency in Christ and His Word. They wouldn’t feel the insecurity that they are feeling. We do the same thing right? Because this world is a scary place with hostile and hopeless circumstances, with death looming, with the uncertainties of life and what the future could bring, we feel threatened. It is intimidating. And how do we typically respond to protect ourselves? We try to protect ourselves by tooting our own horn, by tooting our own self-sufficiency. You find those prideful people that rely on themselves, take pride in themselves, and are the people who have the “pick yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality who don’t need the crutches of Christianity to be successful and victorious in life. My own power and my own wisdom is sufficient to get me through life. I DON’T NEED GOD OR JESUS!!!”

Or in the other sense that feeling of insecurity can manifest itself in taking pride and identity in the strength, wisdom, and power of others which is what many of the Corinthians were doing in putting the apostles and prophets of God up on a pedestal. We form cliques with others or around other prominent celebrities and famous people because we feel safe and secure around them. But if we are boasting in either ourselves or in others, in “men” as Paul calls it, we are deceived. We are self-deceived. And that’s what sin does, the nature of sin is that it is very good at deceiving us! Listen to Hebrews 3:13 which says, “*But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*.” We are in a constant battle with fighting the deceitfulness of our sin, and to combat that, we need to find our sufficiency in Christ and what He has done for us. When you are tempted to sin, sin tells us “go for it, isn’t that something you have been craving? Don’t you need it?” Sin attacks our sense of sufficiency, deceiving us into thinking we are lacking something and that we need to fill that hole in our lives with whatever temptation of sin it is whether that lust, gluttony, wealth, material things, or the lust for fame and recognition and power…but the truth is we have all things in Christ! It’s like being at a 5 star buffet with all the finest food you can eat and someone from the outside comes in offering you food from the trash can saying that its better than what you have.

Chapter 4 verse 1 “*Let a man consider us in this manner, as servants of Christ and the stewards of the mysteries of God*.” Paul says, “all things are yours, all things belong to you brothers in Corinth, including us, so don’t shortchange yourself by limiting your knowledge and truth to just us!” Moreover, you should know that we are just “servants” and “custodians” of the mysteries of God. That word for “servant” is not the typical word for servant that you find in the New Testament which is “diakonos.” It is a different word “hoopereites” meaning “underrower” referring to the slaves in the bottom portion of a ship that were responsible for rowing. If you really want to identify with us apostles so badly, come join us at the very bottom of the ship and row with us slaves! The Apostles has been entrusted with the treasure of the gospel to let it shine in the world, and they are called to be stewards to care for this treasure in the lives of God’s people. Verse 2: “*In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found faithful*.” Faithfulness is the standard by which all leaders of the church will be evaluated and tested. Not human eloquence, not how much people consider you as “wise” but faithfulness to God and the Scriptures. And so that’s why in verse 3 you see Paul is not bothered by the Corinthians who were evaluating him according to worldly standards of speech and rhetoric. Verses 3 and 4 “*But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court. In fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted. But the one who examines me is the Lord*.”

He’s saying you can “examine” me all you want. You can take me to court and have them examine me. You guys are ultimately not the ones who will test me with fire to see whether my works will withstand the heat and I find that they are gold, silver, and precious stones, or whether they will not withstand the heat, and turn out to be wood, hay, and straw and be burnt up. God is the one who knows my heart even better than me! Now, Paul doesn’t want to give any misunderstanding or conclusion that we don’t have to do any self-examination. We are called to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. We are called to mortify our sin which takes discernment and self-examination. That’s why he says, “*For I am conscious of nothing against myself*…” Paul is not claiming sinlessness here as no one is sinless aside from Christ. What he’s saying is that he is not aware of anything sinful he is doing, he’s not aware of any disqualifying sin in his life, because his conscience is clear and it’s not pricked. However, he says, “but not even the fact that I am not aware of any sins against myself is still not the standard for faithfulness.” One will only find out truly how faithful he has lived his life when he stands before the bema seat of judgment is judged by God for his works.

And so Paul concludes by saying verse 5 “*Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and make manifest the motives of hearts. And then each one’s praise will come to him from God*.” As I alluded to before, this is not talking about the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers for their eternal condemnation, but the bema seat judgment of Christ for the believer’s works. And when he talks about not passing judgment before the time, he’s not saying to not judge at all. To recognize sin and heresy and heretical leaders, it must first be judged as sinful and heretical or divisive. But this is different. Because the Corinthian believers were lifting up on leader over the rest, they were concluding in judgment, “oh my leader is the most faithful and best of all over against all your lousy leaders.” Just like how we won’t know conclusively who the next president is going to be until all the ballots are in, so we can’t judge who will receive such and such a reward for their faithfulness and who will not receive such and such a reward. On that day when Christ sits on his bema seat to reward believers for their works, we might be surprised to find out there were some who we thought was faithful in something, and he was not. Or we be surprised to find out that those whom we initially thought were not faithful in something were indeed being faithful to the Lord.   
 I don’t think I will ever be remotely famous, but if I do, and one of you decides to write a biography of my life, don’t write it until after I die because I could still be a fool and mess up my ministry through sin. Only when I breath my last is when from an earthly perspective you can know that I have lived my life in faithfulness. But even then, in a sense all biographies of who we would consider it fall short. Biographies are not 100 percent accurate, because there might be things in each of those men’s lives that may have not been not as faithful as they should have been in. There might be things they might have to answer for. Things maybe in their life that were seeking the praise of man but not God. Bethel, we must always seek the praise, applause, and recognition of God, not man. And the cure to a lack of trusting in the sufficiency of Christ is to know that “all things belong to you.” Or to put in the words of Romans 8:28, To know “that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” To know, as Ephesians 1:3 says that He has “*blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*.” To know that because all things are ours, that’s why Jesus can say in John 14:14 “*If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it*.”

And Jesus will do it not only because He is in control and in power over everything, but He is good and He loves you so much that He can turn even your greatest enemy, death, into your friend. For the unbeliever death is that terrible black door leading into an unimaginable place of eternal suffering. But for the believer, death has been turned into a good door, shining with light, leading into a place of unimaginable eternal joy. If you have not turned away from your sins and called on Jesus as your Lord and King, then you should rightly feel all the insecurity and anxiety in the world. You should rightly feel insufficient in of yourself because you have no power to save yourself from sin’s power. But Christ is sufficient because when He died on that cross, He paid the penalty for your sin, and He can save you from sin and its power and its ultimate consequence, spiritual death. Christ is God’s love gift to the world. There is unending blessing to all those who trust in God’s one and only Son. Trust Him, turn away from a worthless and insufficient life of sin and embrace the infinitely valuable, sufficient, life of the righteousness of Christ. [pray]