

THE GREAT REVERSAL
1 Corinthians 3:18-23
October 16, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

In this text, Paul concludes the argument he began all the way back in the first chapter. Paul has been dealing with the folly of human wisdom and the danger of misplaced loyalties in the church. These things had divided the church at Corinth and caused great disunity in the body. Paul has persistently pressed the gospel and the importance of Christ crucified as the centerpiece of God's wisdom and man's devotion. He now challenges these at Corinth to realize that there must be a change, a great reversal, in the church. *Rather than living according to the wisdom of the world and exalting man, the Christian is to fear God and exalt Christ.* Paul guides the Corinthians by offering two warnings: (1) a warning against deception and (2) a warning against boasting in men.

I. A Warning against Deception (3:18-20)

Deception is defined as “a trick that makes people believe something that is not true; misleading, or not telling the true situation” [*Scholastic Children's Dictionary*, 135]. A few years ago I was eating lunch at a local restaurant in Memphis. As I was eating my sandwich, I looked across the street at a row of shops and noticed a bicycle rolling through the parking lot. I am sure it is a common occurrence for one to ride through that particular parking lot on a nice summer day. However, there was something different about this particular bicycle – it had no rider! It appeared to be driving itself. Notice I say it *appeared* to be driving itself. This particular restaurant sits at a higher ground level than the parking lot across the street. So when one looks across the way they really cannot see the pavement at the bottom of the little hill that juts down into the parking lot. What I really saw when I looked across the street was a bicycle on top of a car. The car was simply driving through the parking area searching for a place to park. However, because of the difference in ground levels and the hill blocking my view, I did not see the car. I only saw the bicycle. Once I came to my senses and reminded myself that bikes cannot drive themselves, I examined the situation more closely to find the truth about what I thought I saw. But for that brief moment, I was deceived in my mind by what I thought I saw.

What in the world does this have to do with Corinth? While those at Corinth certainly did not see riderless bicycles rolling through a parking lot, they had nevertheless been deceived and this deception had caused division and disharmony in the church. There are four things we can take from Paul's warning concerning deception.

1. The Nature of Deception (v. 18a)

Paul begins with the exhortation, “**Let no man deceive himself.**” However, herein lies the problem we have with deception. How can one know if they are being deceived? The very nature of deception is that it keeps one ignorant of two things: (1) the fact that they are being deceived, and (2) the corresponding truth that is being suppressed and/or denied. Go back to my riderless bicycle. I was momentarily deceived because I did not see the true situation in its entirety. For a moment, I was ignorant of the whole truth.

This is the nature of deception. *Deceit distorts.* It clouds the truth but does not deny it entirely. Deceit takes the boldest and grandest of lies and covers it with a thin veil of truth so that one might initially believe it. Look back to the Garden. In Genesis 3, we read the following:

¹Now the serpent was more crafty (slick, deceptive) than any beast in the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” (*distorted God’s command*). ²The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat of it *or touch it*, or you will die.’” (Eve corrects the serpent’s distortion, but shows she does not know the truth perfectly) ⁴The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! (*outright denial*, 2:17 – “You will surely die”) ⁵For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (*truth*, 3:22). ⁶When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was *desirable to make one wise*, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

You see how Satan twisted and distorted the truth. However, in the end, he used the truth and Adam and Eve’s ignorance of the truth as the bait. Adam and Eve did in fact become like God, though not in the fashion that Satan had led them to believe. The fact is that Satan covered a lie, “You surely will not die!” with the truth, “Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” and Adam and Eve believed him. How could this happen? Adam and Eve were created by God and placed in the perfect environment of His creation with absolutely no need whatsoever. They had been fitted for the Garden and the Garden had been fitted for them. How could they have been so naïve and given into the lie of Satan? Herein lies the second thing we see concerning deception in our text.

2. The Root of Deception (v. 18b)

Man is his own greatest enemy. Paul emphasizes the truth that deceit lays not outside the self, but within the self, “**Let no man deceive himself.**” Deceit is rooted in and sprouts from the human heart. Man must come to grips with the truth that deceit, whatever its source might be, feeds on the sin nature of the human heart. One of the greatest lies of our day is the phrase that Flip Wilson popularized, “The devil made me do it!” I realize that many of you younger people have never heard of Flip Wilson (no, he is not a relative of mine), but you have probably heard the phrase and have perhaps even repeated it yourself. But while this popular television skit might have been funny, the suggestion that the devil is culpable for or somehow to blame for our sin simply is not true. A person is deceived because there is something in their heart, some desire or affection which they feel is not being met that deceit latches onto and feeds upon until that person exchanges the truth for a lie and lives their life accordingly. This is exactly what happened in the Garden. Eve was told that she would see more clearly, she was told that she would know more. Satan’s implication was that God was holding something back from Eve. At that moment Eve exposed her heart. Her desire was more wisdom and she took of the tree and she ate. After all, would not God want what was best for her?

Here we see the root of deception as it relates to the human heart – ignorance. In the emotion of the moment, Eve lost her sense of truth. Satan probed her until he made her believe a lie. And the only way that could have happened was for him to prod her ignorance. This is the point that Paul was trying to get across to those at Corinth. Notice he questions their wisdom, “**If any man among you thinks he is wise in this age.**” In 1:18-31, Paul had already written of the danger of worldly wisdom and its foolishness when compared to the wisdom of God. Here Paul is concluding that thought – the wisdom of the age, the wisdom of the world, is foolish. Worldly

wisdom is nothing more than ignorance and a place for deceit to plant its long, deep roots. Paul is pleading with these at Corinth to heed his advice and to live according to the wisdom of God and not according to the wisdom of the world. The world's wisdom is folly and the seedbed for deceit. So what is man to do? How can one know if they are living according to the wisdom of God or chasing the folly of the wisdom of the age? It begins with a great reversal. It begins with the third thing we notice in this text concerning deception.

3. The Truth about Deception (vv. 19-20)

“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.” Why is the world's wisdom foolish before God? Because He made it that way! 1 Cor. 1:20 – “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*” The Almighty God has thwarted the wisdom of man and the efforts of man according to His grace and mercy. And are we not thankful that He has done so? Had God not intervened according to His wisdom in the Garden, all mankind would be doomed. But we see His love, His grace and His mercy as He intervened in the Garden not only by revealing the deception but also by providing a way to be delivered from the deception and its resulting bondage of the human heart. You see, it is in Gen. 3:15, right on the heels of deception, right on the heels of sin, that we see the promise of the Messiah, the Deliverer, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” This is known as the *protoevangel*, “the first gospel,” for it is a divine promise of the defeat of Satan by Christ at the cross. It is this gospel that Paul had repeatedly set forth as true wisdom, preaching Christ crucified, even though the world, according to its wisdom, would never have devised the way of the cross. The world continues to look at the crucifixion as preposterous and foolish. However, **“the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.”** The Lord Himself declared, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Is. 55:8). This is how Paul could come to the conclusion in 1 Cor. 1:25 that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men.” Paul was not saying that God is foolish, but that sinful, depraved man perceives God's thoughts and God's ways as foolish.

Paul reinforced his warning with two Old Testament quotations. The first of these is from Job 5:13 where we find Job's friend Eliphaz offering advice as to where Job should turn in his time of calamity.

¹“Call now, is there anyone who will answer you? And to which of the holy ones will you turn? ²For anger slays the foolish man, and jealousy kills the simple. ³I have seen the foolish taking root, and I cursed his abode immediately. ⁴His sons are far from safety, they are even oppressed in the gate, and there is no deliverer. ⁵His harvest the hungry devour and take it to a *place of thorns*, and the schemer is eager for their wealth. ⁶For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, ⁷for man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward (*wisdom of the world*). ⁸But as for me, I would seek God, and I would place my cause before God; ⁹Who does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number. ¹⁰He gives rain on the earth and sends water on the fields, ¹¹so that He sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. ¹²He frustrates the plotting of the shrewd, so that their hands cannot attain success. ¹³*He captures the wise by their own shrewdness, and the advice of the cunning is quickly thwarted.* ¹⁴By day they meet with darkness, and grope at noon as in the night. ¹⁵But He saves from the sword of their mouth, and the poor from the hand of the mighty. ¹⁶So the helpless has hope, and unrighteousness must shut its mouth” (*wisdom of God*).

The second Old Testament quote is from Psalm 94:11,

⁸Pay heed, you senseless among the people; and when will you understand, stupid ones?

⁹He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?

¹⁰He who chastens the nations, will He not rebuke, *even* He who teaches man knowledge?

¹¹The LORD knows the thoughts (reasonings) of man, that they are a *mere* breath (useless).

The Psalmist speaks much of those that are “stupid,” a reference to the ignorance of the world (Ps. 49:10; 73:22; 92:6; 94:8). Each and every time these “**stupid ones**” are seen as senseless, worthless, powerless, and whose destiny is destruction. In both of these instances, Job and Psalm 94, Paul quoted these Old Testament verses to clinch his argument that the wisdom of the world is futile in the eyes of God. The Corinthians must guard their hearts against the deceit of the world. They must see the wisdom of the world as God sees the wisdom of the world. But how can one guard their heart against the schemes of the devil, the world and the flesh? How can one keep from being deceived? Here Paul offers the fourth thing concerning deception in this text.

4. A Cure for Deception (v. 18c)

It is not enough for one to see the foolishness of the world and the deceit of the world as God sees it. True wisdom, which is the cure for deception, comes in becoming foolish, “**He must become foolish, so that he may become wise.**” How does one become foolish? To become foolish is to turn 180 degrees from the false philosophies and the slick rhetoric of the world to the solid foundation of God’s wisdom. It is to be willing to be viewed as a fool from the world’s perspective. In the nutshell, becoming foolish is a heart-felt, God-wrought desire and passion to *fear God rather than man*. If, as we have proposed, deception is born out of worldly wisdom, i.e., ignorance, then the cure for deception is wisdom, God’s wisdom, which begins with fearing God. The book of Proverbs (which, by the way, is the Book of Wisdom) ties this fear of God to wisdom in numerous places:

Proverbs 1:7 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

All of Proverbs 2 deals with the foolish ways of the world and the wise ways of God, which are tied to fearing Him.

Proverbs 3:7 - Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.

Proverbs 9:10 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 15:33 - The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor *comes* humility.

Which leads us to our second point in this text, Paul’s warning against boasting in verses 21-23.

II. A Warning against Boasting (3:21-23)

On the basis of what he had just said concerning deceit and foolishness (3:18-20), Paul draws a final conclusion, **“So then let no one boast in men.”** Paul had touched on this issue of boasting in a positive manner in 1:31, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” Here he focuses on the negative side of the matter. Elsewhere, in one of the most quoted verses in all of Scripture, Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). But many miss Paul’s purpose in this verse by forgetting v. 9, “Not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Paul’s purpose in Ephesians, as well as in our text in 1 Corinthians, is for the believer to focus on the wisdom and power of God and the work of Christ on their behalf for the entire scope of salvation, so that, as he wrote in 1:29, “no man may boast before God.” The believer’s justification, sanctification and glorification have Christ and Christ alone as not only their source, but also their sustenance. Paul does not denounce all boasting, just misplaced boasting in men, which, just as we have seen with deceit, is rooted in the pride of the human heart. Here Paul sets forth two great dangers of **“boasting in men.”**

1. Causes one to lose focus (v. 21a)

Boasting in men was a problem at Corinth. In the first 3 chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul exposes the problem and how it had fractured the church. Some were of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Cephas, and some of Christ in a proud, arrogant sense. So when they came together on Sunday morning they darted straight for whatever clique they belonged to, although I am sure they called it fellowship. When they gathered to worship, the thoughts and intents of their hearts were on these leaders, not on Christ. But what we must remember is they thought they were right. They saw nothing wrong in what they were doing. According to the world in which they lived, they were simply acting normally. Because of their devotion to men, they had lost their focus on Christ. Therefore, when they came together, worship was not possible. Let me repeat that – because of their boastful devotion to men, these at Corinth lost their focus on the One they should be following and therefore worship was not possible. As you may have heard it stated: The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. They had failed to do this.

This is why Paul went to such great lengths to show them this error. In this chapter (1 Cor. 3), Paul sets forth leaders as servants of God, referring to them metaphorically as God’s farmers and God’s builders. And his question for the Corinthians is, “Why would you follow man when God is in charge?” This goes far beyond settling for second best when the well being of the church is at stake. Here is how D. A. Carson surmises Paul’s pleading:

To boast about some hero or guru is wrong because the focus is wrong; the concentration is on some human being and not on the Lord God. The agricultural analogy has reminded us that God alone assigns the task, and God alone gives life; therefore God alone should be praised. The analogy from the building industry reminds us that God is the Judge, and he deeply cares what kind of edifice, what kind of “temple,” we are putting up. He holds the builders accountable for their work—and, in principle, he threatens to destroy *anyone* who destroys his temple. So why should we be boasting about our attachment to some particular builder? [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 85]

However, many today do not heed Paul’s warning. Often when one is asked about the state of their church they immediately speak of their pastor or some other ministry that is led by some talented or gifted individual. And this is quite natural. Leaders lead. The implication of one that

leads is that he has those who follow. Christ Himself is called the Good Shepherd who has His sheep who know His voice. Pastors or elders are called to lead the flock that God has given to them. The questions then are, “*Where are they leading?*” and “*Why are you following?*”

Many in the church today think they know what they are looking for in the area of leadership. Many will say they want a pastor who preaches the Word. Yet, when they pursue this person, they judge his preaching according to the whims of the day. This is why expository preaching is so scarce today because people are more apt to follow one who tickles their ears and suits their fancy. So we have church after church that is not built upon the solid foundation of biblical preaching but upon glorified personalities who look good and sound good. We need more men like Paul to stand up today and send the warning that to follow men and to boast in men is a danger to the church. It is no wonder that so many churches cave when the personality it was built upon has departed. Paul preached Christ crucified, not in the eloquent and crafty language of the day. Both he and Apollos were God’s servants, doing His work. Peter preached thunder amongst the Jews. These men’s ministries involved calling others to follow Christ and Christ alone – for the sake of Christ alone. Paul reminds the Corinthians that to boast in men was to neglect boasting in Christ. To boast in men is to lose one’s focus.

2. Causes one to neglect the gifts of God (21b-22)

Paul added, “**For all things belong to you.**” The Corinthians would immediately recognize Paul’s intent. The phrase “**all things belong to you**” was a common expression of the Stoic philosophy that claimed wisdom as mastery over all one encounters in life. Paul used this Stoic saying to encourage the Corinthians to gain a proper, Christ-centered perspective of their lives. The Corinthians should recognize that there was much more to life than the intellectual wisdom of this world. They needed the spiritual wisdom that comes from God alone to understand that all people, all things and all events, everything, had been given to them in Christ.

a. All of God’s leaders

The church does not belong to godly leaders; godly leaders belong to the church. Godly leadership, *all* godly leadership, is God’s gift to a local body and should not become sources of division. They belong to the church in the same way the farmer belongs to the field and the builder belongs to the building project. As we have already seen, “**boasting in men**” causes one to lose their spiritual perspective on Christ. But focusing on one individual also causes one to miss the blessing of other leaders that God has provided to make up the whole. This is how disunity and disharmony rears its ugly head in the body. When one person receives undue praise and accolades, other leaders are excluded from doing the work for which they were called. Paul reminds the Corinthians that all men, whether it be Paul, Apollos or Cephas or any other leader, had been given to them, all of them, to edify, exhort and encourage the body.

b. All of life’s tyrannies

I am indebted to D.A. Carson for much of this section. Paul does not stop with men or godly leadership in his description of “**all things.**” The five things that follow incorporate what philosophers designate as the tyrannies of human life. These are things that, according to the wisdom of the world, enslave us and keep us in bondage.

(1) World – This world squeezes us into its mold (Rom. 12:2). This world ties us down as we focus all of our efforts and energies in this world rather than the world to come.

(2) **Life** – This life cries out about rights and respect due it. We cling to life as if the Bible never talks of life as a vapor or withering flower, here today and gone tomorrow.

(3) **Death** – Death hovers over us at all times. No one can escape it. It is the ultimate tyranny. “Its power extends far beyond the mere experience of it. Because it looms just over the horizon, it casts its long dark shadow backwards and constrains us all our lives.” We spend our entire lives avoiding death.

(4) **Present** – the constant urgency of the present, the “now,” that deceives us into thinking that we cannot wait until tomorrow.

(5) **Future** – the vague promises and threats of the future keep us spending our time in the present in hopes of avoiding the unavoidable in the future.

There you have it – the dark, gloomy philosophical mindset of the wisdom of the world. You might as well grin and bear it because there is nothing you can do about it. So do what you can to survive, but do not get your hopes too high because the fellow next to you is in the same rat race with you. These tyrannies are the world’s greatest enemies.

But Paul says, “**the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you.**” The Christian has a different perspective on these things because he approaches them not according to the wisdom of man but according to the wisdom of God. The Christian views each of these as gifts or blessings from God, not as hopeless tyrannies of life.

(1) **World** – the Christian views this world as the gateway to the next. It is into this world that God has placed us to live our lives and reflect His glory.

(2) **Life** – Life is no longer something we cling to, but live serving our Creator and Redeemer in anticipation of the life to come.

(3) **Death** – Death no longer has the last word, but has been defeated at the Cross of Calvary. The believer can cry out with Paul, “For me to live is Christ, but to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

(4) **Present** – The present is no longer something to be feared, but to be lived for in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. There is no circumstance that can hold us in its sway if we cast all of our cares upon Him (1 Peter 5:7).

(5) **Future** – The future is no longer something to be feared because of the hope we have in Christ Jesus, who is sovereign over all things.

Do you see the difference in perspective? The Christian is to have an entirely different outlook and attitude in all things because his confidence is in God and Christ. And the Christian has this security and confidence because they “**belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.**” No matter what happens in this life, the believer can rest assured of their eternal destiny because they belong to Christ, they are in union with Him. And there is added security that the believer’s blessings are secure because Christ’s place at the right hand of the Father is secure, “**Christ belongs to God.**” “Therefore, nothing can separate us from the love of God, not death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any created thing” (Romans 8:38-39).

Conclusion

We need to see a great reversal in the church today. Have you become party to the wisdom of the world? Have you fallen into the deceptive snare of the wisdom of this age? Then you are

called to a radical repentance. You are called to turn from the wisdom of the world and become fools for Christ.

Do you boast in men? Do you serve men rather than the body? Do you live as if nothing can separate you from the love of God? Or has this life and the things of this life choked the spiritual life out of you? Then you are called to recognize that all things are yours.