
A Very Small Thing

1 Corinthians 4:3-5; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6

OPC Women's 2021 Virtual Retreat ~ August 28th ~ Tricia Mathys

I. The City of Corinth – a brief introduction

Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 3 for a quick introduction before we turn to chapter 4 for our morning's Scripture focus.

A. The City of Corinth was very much like the current culture we find ourselves surrounded by in the 21st century (*background information in this section comes from "Preaching the Word" commentary on 1 Corinthians by Stephen Um*).

- 1) Corinth was a city of aspirations – citizens were looking to advance up the ladder of social mobility by establishing their own kind of honor through social associations, standing and influence.
- 2) It was a cosmopolitan city. There was great religious, social, and cultural diversity.
- 3) Accordingly, in this place of aspiration and diversity, the Corinthians found themselves looking for some kind of personal foundation that would provide them with a personal identity. For example, in previous chapters, they claimed various allegiances for their position in society: "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas" (1 Cor 1:12).
- 4) But in this first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is making it very clear that none of those leaders were ever meant to function as foundations.

1 Corinthians 3:5-7 *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. (6) I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (7) So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

- 5) He's going to emphasize that they ALREADY have an identity-forming foundation.
1 Corinthians 3:11 *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*
- 6) Christ is the foundation, and in Him, God has given "all things" to His community.
1 Corinthians 3:21-23 *So let no one boast **in men**. For all things are yours, (22) whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, (23) and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*
- 7) In other words, Paul was telling them that they don't have to divide over leaders, or ruin themselves in pursuit worldly status.
- 8) Belonging to Christ, there was no reason to boast in social associations or their standing in community; Jesus had already given them – and us – "all things."

II. *The Corinthian Struggle...our struggle.*

A. Okay, so it's in to that background and setting (which is very much *our* social, cultural setting) that we come to our main passage for this morning, which is from Chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians. I hope that brief introduction helps these next verses really resound for you. Paul is speaking here in:

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

*[1] This is how one **should** regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. [2] Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. [3] But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. [4] For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. [5] Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

B. Notice the four courts of judgment Paul identifies: the judgment of others, the judgment of human courts, our own judgments, and the judgment of Christ. And notice especially that he describes those first 3 judgments as, to him, *a very small thing.*" The real, but nuanced bluntness here is EVERYTHING

C. **The Judgments of Others**

- 1) The AMAZING thing about Paul saying, *"But with me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you..."* is that he is turning the fear of man on its head. Paul certainly did **not** struggle with this wildly common tendency.
- 2) You see, when we start to expect and fear the judgment of others, the next thing you know, we're living in the FEAR OF MAN.
- 3) What others say or think about us becomes a snare because we look at ourselves – and our world – through the eyes of others, and become ensnared by the need to have someone to look out to for approval and acceptance.
- 4) When we're performing at a high level and feel accepted, fear of man can be good to us. But we know that's impossible to maintain. Ultimately, we end up paralyzed by the judgments of others. We become exhausted because we're living out our lives in front of a watching, but oh so critical world.
- 5) Once we take our eyes OFF the Lord and put them ON man, it's only a matter of time until we believe we don't measure up. That's what a horizontal perspective does to us. Which is why...
 - **Proverbs 29:25** *The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.*
 - **1 Samuel 15:24** *Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.*
- 6) The heartbreak here is that when we live out of a fear of man, we're revealing that – functionally – we don't trust the **Lord's** judgment, or "better word" over our lives.

- 7) Fear of man means we put another in the place of God. Our thoughts and behaviors are molded more by man than by God and His Word. The fear of man is a snare because man is a false god, but the fear of the Lord is safe because He really is God. On He can position, preserve, and protect us (v 25).
- 8) The person to whom we give power and authority over our “esteem” is the person we fear the most because it reveals where we look for our source of acceptance and, therefore, how we believe the world to be organized. Do we look out, or do we look UP?
- 9) Fear of man causes us to forget not only Whose we are, but where we are.
 - a) *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)*
 - b) The goal and remedy is to trust God’s Word over our lives so that “we can confidently say, *“The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:6).*

D. The Judgments of Self - what we say or think of ourselves

- 1) The main kind of self-judgment is PRIDE, or self-righteousness. The Corinthians had plenty of this.
- 2) That’s what Paul is addressing in **verse 7** *For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*
- 3) See, in this verse, Paul is asking the Corinthians, “What makes you think you are somehow different, superior? Why are you entitled to boast in what you possess?” They were caught up in “the boastful pride of life:” Looking at ourselves and our world through our own eyes, *so that* we find a way to look down on others.
- 4) Isn’t it strange, not only do we often believe that we do NOT measure up in the eyes of others – the fear of man – but we also tend to believe that we **far surpass** the measure of others.
- 5) Paul himself was being subjected to this kind of superiority. He was being critically and improperly evaluated by the Corinthian church and labors in his letter to get them to snap out of it. He’s challenging the basis of their evaluations and prescribing a more accurate approach when he says, *“This is how one should regard us... as servants and stewards...”*
- 6) He firmly, yet somehow also winsomely, corrects their faulty, self-established measuring rods.

E. In contrast and correction to the judgment of others and the judgment of ourselves, Paul declares “It is the Lord who judges me.”

- 1) This is TRUE “self-esteem.” This is the conclusion a Christian is to grab hold of as she embraces what God thinks and says about her. True biblical self-esteem comes from the declarations God’s Word has made about you.

- 2) Because of the kind of comparative, cancel culture we live in, which questions our influence and identity *all the time*...we NEED to be able to rattle off the countless Biblical truths that tell us who we are in Christ.
- 3) This may sound dramatic, but your life depends on it. I know mine does. I can't afford to have competing ideas floating around in my mind when it comes to my identity. Unless the Lord, through His word, has declared it about me, I am unimpressed.
- 4) And one more thing: not only do the loving judgments of God free us from fear of man and pride; they also free us from another kind of deadly self-judgment. The self-condemnation of an identity rooted in SHAME...
 - a) A few quick words about shame: I don't mean the shame of guilt.
 - b) I mean the kind of shame that takes aim at your identity, declaring: NOT enough, never enough, less than, unacceptable, broken and unfixable, reviled, rejected.
 - c) THAT kind of shame and those words do NOT come from your identity in Christ.
 - d) If you live under the soul-crushing weight of shame...God has fixed His gaze upon you and is especially interested in your pain. For He has declared you to be His own beloved child. God's Word speaks Honor over you, because in Christ, you are now: A beloved child, accepted, cherished, more than, healed and blessed. He has **silenced** the voice of the accuser, the father of lies.
 - e) He has rolled away your reproach. And the faith He's given you extinguishes every fiery arrow of the enemy. You have a new name. Unashamed.
 - i. *I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. (Psalms 34:4-5)*

F. So back to our passage, part of the issue at hand in Corinth, which Paul is addressing, is that the judgments of the Corinthians were wrong because they were based on speculations, and they were premature. (Again, here I owe a debt of gratitude to Stephen Um for his marvelous commentary on 1 Corinthians.)

- 1) They, like us, couldn't know and see everything – certainly not as it pertains to the human heart. There are motivations within every one of us that are hidden from the human eye. Which is why Paul makes the exhortation in verse 5, "*Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time*".
- 2) Echoing the words of Jesus in Matt 7:1, Paul is saying, Stop passing judgment, stop criticizing.
- 3) That speculative, critical habit was ruining the Corinthian Church.
- 4) But we're just like them...continually evaluating everything around us: people, places, ideologies, theologies, social media posts...you name it, we judge it. Whether it's to look up to someone, or to look down on someone, this is our tendency.
- 5) Paul is reminding all of us how careful we need to be and to rest assured that the day WILL come, he says in verse 5, when "*[Jesus] will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of*

the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” (1 Corinthians 4:5)

- 6) Albert Barnes writes, “Since there are so many things that go to make up the character of a man - things which we cannot know infallibly, and which are often concealed from us, we ought not to pass harsh opinions on the conduct of our fellow believers.” (Albert Barnes Notes on the Bible)
- 7) In light of that truth, we are wise to remember that our self-appointed authority to evaluate either others OR ourselves reveals a failure to recognize that the true evaluating authority lies elsewhere, and is bigger than any “human court.”

G. Which means, there must be another way.

III. The Corinthian Remedy

A. What’s the kind of evaluation we ACTUALLY desire? If we’re saved, we have a longing in our hearts for the merciful judgments only God can proclaim and make good on. Paul gives us a glimpse of that desire in this passage:

B. *“This is how one **should** regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. [2] Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.”(v.1-2)*

- 1) We’re meant to value ultimate commendation, again – both of ourselves and others – over short-lived and limited earthly praise.
- 2) Like Paul, the lives that we’ve been given in Christ call us to be servants doing our Master’s bidding, and stewards – like the manager of an estate – distributing goods that aren’t ours but that we’ve been entrusted with.
- 3) We don’t want to be judged on production value, but on faithfulness to our service and stewardship of the Master’s riches.

C. The Corinthians were just the opposite though, in all their divisiveness, they’d forgotten this: their abilities, opportunities, and blessings were from God.

- 1) So Paul has to remind them that everything they have is a gift. He asks them in **verse 7**, *“What do you have that you did not receive?”*
- 2) In my own paraphrase, he’s saying, What in the world are you doing boasting about what you have...when it was GIVEN to you! You didn’t create it, you didn’t imbue yourself with it. You didn’t earn it. It’s ALL a gift. Stop your prideful boasting.”

D. And here we come full circle back to verses 3 and 4,

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. (1 Corinthians 4:3-4)

E. You see, the evaluation we want is not the judgment of others (fear of man), our own judgments (pride/shame), or any human court that runs counter to the court of God.

- 1) We want to find our identity and peace in this statement: *“For it is the Lord who judges me.”*

- 2) Now, the word “judges” can be a scary word, and indeed for unbelievers it is a terrifying word = because it’s an examination in order to pronounce a legal sentence.
 - 3) But as a servant of the Lord, what IS the legal sentence that’s been pronounced over you?
 - 4) “... *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (18) All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (19) that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (20) Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. 2 Corinthians 5:17-20a*
 - 5) You have been declared free of guilt and acceptable to God. The very definition of justification.
 - 6) How? Through the righteousness of Another bestowed upon you. Another who knew no sin but took our sin upon Himself, becoming sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). This is the double-imputation.
 - 7) Why? Because the Father determined to place His love upon us (Deut 7:6-8; John 3:1)
- F.** How’s that for a better evaluation? A better judgment than any human court?
- 1) The Lord’s word trumps our judgments and self-evaluations. When Paul says that he does not know of any fault in himself, he’s not saying he’s above reproach. He’s just saying that’s not the point; because Another’s evaluation is ultimate.
 - 2) Whether we find fault or not with ourselves, that does not justify us. But God’s declarative judgment over us DOES.
- G.** God’s evaluation and radical judgment of us comes from the work of Jesus applied to us. With His fingerprints upon us, our sins are now evaluated by what we have believed about Jesus, not by what we or others have believed about us.
- H.** This is how we should be regarded: as servants and stewards of Christ. As those who elevate others by seeing them through God’s eyes, as those who are humble because we know that everything we have is a gift we’ve received, as those who are cheerful givers because we have been entrusted with kingdom riches, as those who use our considerable resources on behalf of the powerless.
- I.** This is the upside-down paradigm of the kingdom of God, in which the person of Jesus Christ makes us noble and heroic, despite our natural flaws.

IV. *Our Ongoing Struggle*

- A.** And boy don’t we struggle to remember the wonders of God’s glorious decrees over us! This is our dilemma as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.
- B.** So what’s a forgetful, often double-minded girl to do?
- C.** Here I thought I’d take us is to Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, chapter 10.
- 1) In this 2nd letter we find some in the church at Corinth still a little judgey; so Paul once again defends His legitimacy as an Apostle. He encourages the

repentant members of the church, and appeals to the still-rebellious minority.

- 2) We're going to look at a really, really well-known verse from the third portion of this letter, where Paul is confronting those who were criticizing him.
- 3) What we find here is a PRINCIPLE. Which is this: by the power of the Spirit we tear down the strongholds of wrong thinking and behavior that resist God's authority and the identity He has given us in Christ.
- 4) And whether the criticisms, condemnations, or contrary beliefs come from ourselves or from others, this is a great principle to understand.

D. Take every thought captive

2 Corinthians 10:3-6

[3] For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

[4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. [5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, [6] being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

E. Here is the principle: We have access to weapons of divine power to destroy strongholds.

- 1) Clearly, Paul is using the word "stronghold" metaphorically. He's referring to a war NOT of the flesh, but of the spirit.
- 2) So what does the metaphor mean?
 - a) If a stronghold is a fortress, and Paul is saying that the strongholds at hand need to be destroyed, then the metaphor is that there are mental, intellectual, and emotional arguments and opinions that act as prisons.
 - b) Note that a stronghold can be life-taking or life-giving. **Proverbs 10:29a** tells us, "*The way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless...*"
 - c) But the strongholds Paul's talking about here are the life-taking kind that lock you IN and keep divine power OUT. Keeping you imprisoned in wrong thinking and wrong behavior.
 - d) These strongholds can be about God, Jesus, the Word, ourselves, others, the world...any of the BIG things of life.
 - e) And once they become a stronghold, we hunker down in them and they not only keep us locked IN, but they also lock OUT the help we need.
 - f) Dr. Leonardo De Chirico writes:

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/strongholds-and-supremacy>

"Paul knows his enemies are not people but distorted patterns of thought and life. According to this text, enemies have a spiritual nature, an intellectual appeal, an aesthetic attraction, a social dimension, an aggregating power, financial resources, or ideological consistency that makes them effective in people's life. Paul calls them logismoi (low-GEEZ-oh-my), worldviews that drive people.

Logismoi are [false reasonings] that provide alternative accounts and answers to the fundamental questions of life. They are spiritual metanarratives that shape people's lives, deviating them from the truth of Christ. Paul's language here is not merely descriptive or sociological. He is not interested in providing scholarly

insights on the powerful patterns of Greco-Roman thought. He is engaged in a spiritual war that demands spiritually violent activities.

These logismoi are spiritual strongholds to be destroyed because they are taking people captive, away from God. The use of spiritual weapons is involved in this dismantling exercise of crooked arguments, lofty opinions, deviant trajectories that make these patterns of thought and life powerful. While we must always love people, we should be aggressive against evil logismoi.

Spiritual wars are not only destructive but constructive. Paul said the aim of battle is to take every thought captive to obey Christ. Demolition is only the means toward a bigger goal: redeeming corrupted logismoi and transforming them into patterns of thought and life that are biblically faithful and Christ-honoring.

- g) “Spiritual wars are not only destructive but constructive (!)” Indeed, Paul tells us that we’re equipped with divine power that destroys the strongholds we’ve hunkered down in AND that brings us up to Christ.
- h) So let’s talk about these weapons that have “*divine power to demolish strongholds.*”
- i. **The Holy Spirit at work in us** (John 14:26, I Cor 2:9-14, I Cor 12:7, Rom 8:26-27, Gal 5:16, Gal 5:22-25)
 - ii. **God’s Word** (1 Corinthians 1:18, John 17, Eph 6:16, Hebrews 4:12).
 - We defeat “arguments” and “lofty opinions” with Truth (**John 17:17** *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*)
 - The word picture of “taking every thought captive to obey Christ” is of lowering and leading away (as a prisoner or captive) every faulty perception, making it attentive, compliant, and submissive to Jesus’ salvation, our identity in Him, and God’s present faithfulness.
 - iii. **Our prayers of faith** (James 5:13-18, Mark 9:29, Phil 4:6-7, Romans 8:34b)
 - *John Bunyan wrote, “Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan.”*
 - One of my favorite ideas about prayer is that we are joining Jesus in His prayers for US. He prays before us. When we begin to pray, we are JOINING Christ in His petitions for us.
 - Prayer: Jesus, as You know, I have mental, intellectual, and emotional strongholds in my life. These strongholds distort my perceptions. They keep me leaning on my own understanding. I desire that these strongholds be destroyed so that I can perceive clearly Who you are and who you say I am. Be glorified by bringing my thoughts into obedience to You. Amen.
 - iv. **Our praise and thanksgiving** (Psalm 22:3, Acts 16:25-35, Rev 12:10-11, 2 Chron 5:14; 2 Chron 20). When we offer our

praise to God – no matter our circumstance – we are actively putting more trust and focus on His faithfulness, power, provision, and promises than on our plight.

- v. **The saints gathered together as the church** (Matt 16:8; Psalm 22:3; Psalm 8:2/Matt 21:16; Eph 3:20-21). *Throughout history – the community of God has always gathered to affirm the ancient words: ‘You are our God. We are your people’. The Church gathers unto the risen and reigning person of Jesus, to proclaim Him as King and to be formed together into a people who live in the ways of His Kingdom. Gathering both expresses and enacts the Oneness of who we are. Gathered as God’s people, we respond in worship to embody the healing hope of heaven in the earthy places we inhabit. We gather as a people to embody and encounter the presence of God.* (<https://www.reimaginingfaith.com/blog/when-you-gather-together-why-does-the-church-gather/2020/6>)

3) Armed with this divine power, we ask the Lord to:

- a) **Impart** truth and faith (*I do believe, help my unbelief!* **Mark 9:24**)
- b) **Imbue** our hearts with these things (*He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.* **Psalms 1:3**)
- c) **Grow** them (*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.* **1 Corinthians 3:7**)
- d) And then ask that He would **receive back** our worship, as we stand on truths, believing that God’s power and faithfulness can bring about change in our present situations, both individually and for the church of God on earth. (*From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him.* **Psalms 22:25**). When we praise the Lord we are offering back to Him the praise due His name.

4) **Regarding Praise:** What if we enter the presence of God with praise for *who we need Him to be in our present circumstances?* What if we *declare and exalt the known attributes and characteristics of God that we need to experience in our present reality.*

(<https://www.happyhealthyandprosperous.com/why-you-should-always-start-with-praise/>)

- a) For example, if we seek healing, we could say, “I praise you God because Christ has healed my iniquity.” If we need comfort, we can say, “Praise You Lord that You sent Your Comforter.” If we need to feel loved, we can declare, “Praise you Father that you loved me first and sent Christ to be the proof of your Love.” If we don’t know what to do in a situation or need direction, we can say, “I Praise you God because Jesus is to me the wisdom of God.”
- b) It’s almost like a prayer request, but instead we’re offering praise because it’s who the triune God **IS**. At the same time, praising this way gives us peace and reassurance because not only are we praising God, but we’re also reminding ourselves that God is the answer to whatever it is we need at the time.

- c) Praising God reminds us of His benefits, lifts our eyes off of man's judgements, frees us from *self*-judgment, and destroys distorted patterns of thinking that lead us away from God.
- d) Hearts and mouths filled with gratitude, thankfulness, praise, and a strong memory of God's past and present faithfulness wield divine power for ourselves, and a watching world desperate to know Christ's saving acts.

So let us declare with David...

Psalm 103:1-6 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! (2) Bless the LORD, O my soul, ***and forget not all his benefits***, (3) who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, (4) who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, (5) who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (6) The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.

With truths like that on our lips, all other competing and critical voices become "a very small thing," for it is the Lord's gracious actions and declarations over us that give true life and true identity.