

The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness - 1 Corinthians 3:21-4:7

Big idea: Because you are Christ's, you do not need to boast in men, live under man's verdict, or compete for glory. In Christ, all things are yours; people become gifts, the courtroom is closed, and comparison becomes gratitude.

Introduction - The Corinthians were giving away something priceless and settling for something cheap. They were forsaking Christ because they had forgotten the worth of Christ, boasting in Paul, Apollos, and Cephas as if human approval could give them identity, weight, and glory. Paul brings them back to the gospel: why chase approval from men who themselves need the approval of Christ? We do the same whenever we stand before people like beggars with empty hands, forgetting that in Christ God has filled those hands with every spiritual blessing.

1. The Problem: Sinfully Settling by Boasting in Men (1 Cor 3:21; 4:6) - Paul says, "Let no one boast in men." Boasting is not merely bragging; it is where your soul goes for worth, joy, and weight. It is what you use to say, "This proves I matter." The Corinthians were not merely appreciating teachers; they were using teachers to become somebody. That is why they became "puffed up against one another." A swollen ego is a starving ego: loud, sensitive, needy, and easy to pop. Pride often looks like confidence on the outside, but underneath it is insecurity dressed up as strength. The soul was made for God-sized glory, and no man's praise can fill a God-sized heart. Man's approval is a toothpick thrown into the Grand Canyon of the soul, begging it to fill it.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 1:31; Jeremiah 2:13; Ephesians 1:3.

2. The Cure: Boasting in Christ (1 Cor 3:22-23) - Paul answers their insecurity with inheritance: "all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." They had it backward. They did not belong to Paul; Paul belonged to them as a servant and gift. In Christ the world is yours, life is yours, death is yours, the present is yours, and the future is yours. You do not have to worship the world, fear the world, or squeeze identity from it. Receive it, steward it, enjoy it, and give thanks. Life is no longer a stage for approval or a scoreboard for comparison; every morning you wake up inside the mercies of God. Even death, though still an enemy, is a conquered enemy. In Christ it is no longer punishment but passage, a defeated servant forced to carry the believer into glory.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 3:22-23; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 8:28; Lamentations 3:22-23; 1 Corinthians 2:9.

3. The Application: Draw from the Well of What You Already Know - Paul keeps asking the Corinthians, "Do you not know?" Their problem was not that they had never heard the truth, but that they were not living from the truth they already knew. Sunday can feel like Mount Rainier on a clear day: Christ's work shines bright. Then Monday's fog rolls in, and we forget Him. The answer is not novelty, but meditation. The finished work of Christ is like living water at the bottom of a deep well. You can stand beside a well all day and still die of thirst; you have to draw it up and drink. Do not just believe the gospel in general. Drag the gospel into the room where your approval-craving, anxiety, criticism, or fear is throwing a fit. What we will not meditate on, we cannot apply; and what we do not apply will not help us.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 3:23; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Jeremiah 2:13; John 4:14; Romans 8:1.

4. The Change: People Put in Their Proper Place (1 Cor 4:1-2) - Once you remember what you have in Christ, you will not despise people, but you will demote them to their proper place. Paul says ministers are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." That applies broadly: pastors, bosses, spouses, friends, children, and critics can all grow too large in the soul. Their approval inflates you; their criticism deflates you; their opinion becomes your verdict. Put them where Paul puts them: servant, steward, gift. Receive

the good through them. Thank God for them. But do not let them name, save, judge, or become your boast. A faithful minister is like the best man at a wedding: he exists to make the groom look good, hand you Christ, and gladly get out of the way.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 1 Peter 5:2; John 3:29-30; 2 Corinthians 4:5.

5. The Freedom: The Courtroom Is Closed (1 Cor 4:3-5) - Paul says it is a very small thing to be judged by any human court, and he does not even judge himself. Human opinions are not nothing, but they are not final. Paul refuses to let Corinth's bench become his judgment seat. The lesser court does not sound so loud once you have heard the Supreme Court. Your voice is not final. Their voice is not final. Even your conscience is not final. It is the Lord who judges. And in Christ, the Judge who knows everything about you declares, "No condemnation." You do not obey for a verdict; you obey from a verdict already delivered. The final word over the Christian is not rejected, exposed, condemned, or cast away, but welcomed - because you are Christ's.

So mothers must not drag motherhood into the courtroom asking, "What is the verdict on me?" A clean house, obedient children, or another woman's approval may encourage you, but cannot acquit you. A messy house, hard day, unseen labor, or criticism cannot condemn you. Fathers must not stand trial before respect, control, career, or success. Children must not let popularity, grades, sports, beauty, friends, or even parents' approval sit on the judge's bench over the soul. Workers must remember that productivity, promotion, and praise are not the final judge. One "well done" from the Praiseworthy One outweighs a thousand "good jobs" from the praise-needy.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 4:3-5; Romans 8:1; Romans 8:33-34; 1 John 4:18; Matthew 25:21.

6. The Result: Comparison Becomes Gratitude (1 Cor 4:7) - Paul closes by asking, "What do you have that you did not receive?" Take the best thing about you: mind, work ethic, gifts, strength, opportunity, family, ministry, or salvation. Attach a thank-you note to it. You did not achieve existence. You received life, breath, ability, opportunity, salvation, and Christ. When gifts become gratitude, boasting in anything other than God dies. The Christian life moves from competition to gratitude, from achieved to received. If everything is gift, then everything becomes gratitude.

Scriptures used: 1 Corinthians 4:7; James 1:17; Acts 17:25; Ephesians 2:8-10; 1 Corinthians 1:30-31.