

## 1 Corinthians 4A (2013)

- Last week Paul was guiding us through a construction project of sorts
  - Paul's point, as you remember, was to draw a comparison between the work of constructing a building and our work in serving the Lord
    - And the analogy had several parts
    - We read in 3:9 Paul said he and Apollos were God's workers
    - And the field or place of work was us, the Church
    - Paul then calls the body of Christ "God's building"
  - Then as we moved forward in the analogy, Paul says that men who work for the Lord have opportunity to construct God's building, that is the Church, using two different types of materials
    - On the one hand, we can work on the building using precious materials
    - We can construct something lasting, durable, precious to the Lord
    - These are works in the body of Christ that promote holiness, spiritual maturity, love, forgiveness, generosity, sacrifice, glory and honor to the Lord
  - On the other hand, we can work in such a way that produces nothing durable, nothing valuable in God's building
    - We can choose to spend our time, energy and resources on priorities that aren't the Lord's priorities
    - Essentially, we're like that one construction worker who stands around and watches the others at work
    - We've got the hard hat, we're wearing the tool belt, but we're not putting them to work in a useful, helpful way
  - And then Paul said the Lord will test our work on the day of judgment
    - In that moment, truth will become evident or obvious
    - The work we did which mattered to Christ will be cause for reward

- And the wasted time that produced no value will be lost opportunity
- Now we move forward in Chapter 3 and into Chapter 4 with Paul continuing to use this analogy of God's building
  - Let's see where he goes next

**1Cor. 3:16** Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

**1Cor. 3:17** If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

- Paul asks the church a rhetorical question: don't you know (or understand) that the church is the temple of God?
  - In Greek, the pronoun "you" is a plural word
    - Paul is working with his analogy of a building representing the church body
    - Paul isn't talking about the individual body per se
    - He's talking about the body of Christ, the collective body of the church
  - Paul asks don't you understand that the church is the temple of God?
    - This building that we are supposed to construct is a special, holy building to God
    - It's not just some common construction project
    - Building up God's people is the most important construction project on earth, at least in this day
  - The reason it's so important is because the Spirit of God resides in this temple
    - In ancient Israel, the glory of God dwelled among men in a different kind of building, a stone temple
    - God tabernacled within this building, so He placed great importance on how it was built and maintained
- So Paul draws out his analogy in making application for us today

- We are that temple of God today
  - Today, the Lord's Spirit indwells a group of people rather than a single stone temple
  - Therefore, He concerns Himself with the construction and maintenance of this building every bit as much as the earlier structure
  - In fact, He is far more concerned with the construction of the church because we are living stones, His adopted sons and daughters
- Consequently, how stringent do you suppose the Lord's test will be for how we worked on God's building?
  - When the day of judgment comes, God will take a sober view of how we treated the construction work we were given
  - Paul says in v.17 that if someone makes a point of tearing down, destroying the temple of God, God will destroy him
    - Paul is using an extreme example of a false teacher, an unbeliever, who enters the church with the intent to do harm
    - This person will be destroyed in the same way that the Lord destroyed those who violated His temple in Israel

[1Cor. 3:18](#) 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.

[1Cor. 3:19](#) 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";

[1Cor. 3:20](#) and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS."

[1Cor. 3:21](#) So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you,

[1Cor. 3:22](#) whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you,

[1Cor. 3:23](#) and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

- Paul says we shouldn't deceive ourselves concerning the seriousness of our coming test and the standard the Lord will apply when judging
  - God cares deeply about the construction project we've been given

- Building up the church is a holy project, one intended to reflect glory on the Lord
- We can't expect the Lord to overlook shoddy work
- And Paul wants us to know what's coming so we may be motivated to do the right things now
- And in the case of the Corinthian church, Paul wants them to boast in the right things
  - When Paul says that if the Corinthians want to value wisdom, they need to understand what spiritual wisdom looks like
  - In a nutshell, it looks exactly the opposite of earthly wisdom
  - In most cases, you can arrive at the wisdom of God by taking the world's wisdom and reversing it
    - When the world says Evolution, God says Creation
    - When the world says self-esteem is good, God says pride is bad
    - When the world says the earth is permanent, God says it's temporary
    - When the world says man is temporary, God says we're eternal
    - When the world says there are many ways to Heaven, God says there is one way
    - When the world says there is no truth, God says Truth is a Person
- That's what Paul means when he says to become spiritually wise we must be willing to be seen as foolish in the eyes of the world
  - We must be willing to be humbled by the truth of God's word
  - We must be willing to reject the world's standards, the world's criteria for power and wisdom
  - And once we have set aside the world's wisdom, the Lord begins to build us up again in His wisdom
- That's what working to build God's building looks like when it's done properly

- Precious stones and gold are symbolic measures of introducing godly wisdom and promoting spiritual growth in the body of Christ
  - We deceive ourselves when we try to build God's building with the wisdom or intelligence of the world
  - It's laboring with straw and hay
  - Any time men devise new ways to accomplish the purposes God has already established in His word, then they are working in foolishness
- In v.20 Paul says such efforts are useless
  - He means they do not work and they do not profit the builder
  - The building of God's building is a spiritual work, not a physical work
  - The size and appearance of the church is not the measure the Lord will use in the day of judgment
    - Those are things that men boast in and men like to build
    - But they are not durable or precious works God wants for us
- Such things are boasting in men, and we can't do that if we expect a reward
  - There is no such thing as a breakthrough in church planting
    - There is no such thing as a new technique for building up believers
  - Churches grow only upon God's decision to affect that growth
  - Believers are disciplined the old fashioned way
    - By teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded from God's word
  - The best any man can hope to do in serving the Lord is to lay the right foundation, plant the seed, water it, and trust God to grow it
  - We can't improve the foundation, we can't make a better seed, we can't control the growth

- Therefore, we can't boast in men
- Then in vs.21-23, Paul ends with a beautiful and powerful reminder of our relationship to each other in the body of Christ
  - Paul says all things belong to us
    - He means there is no one within the body of Christ who is privileged above anyone else in such a way that we have reason to create special affiliations
    - We share the same origins in faith
    - We share the same power in the Spirit
    - We share the same destiny in Christ
    - All these things belong to the entire body of Christ
  - Whatever Paul or Apollos or Peter accomplished in working on God's building traced back to the power and grace of Christ
    - And from Christ, it itself traced back to the Father
    - Since we all share that same affiliation to Christ and the Father, we all have the same status and merit with regard to the building process
    - Further distinctions or associations are pointless
    - This is spiritual wisdom
- So with the issue of boasting having been settled, Paul will now explain the proper perspective this church should have for the apostles' roles

**1Cor. 4:1** Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

**1Cor. 4:2** In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

**1Cor. 4:3** 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.

**1Cor. 4:4** For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

**1Cor. 4:5** Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

- When the church in Corinth encountered a great man like Paul or Peter, he asked they be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of mysteries
  - The word for servant in Greek is *huperetes* is literally the word “under rower”
    - It’s a word most often translated officer
    - It describes a position of authority that serves under a superior
      - Like a sergeant under an officer
    - So we should regard men who serve in significant positions within the church as men and women commissioned by Christ to serve us
  - Secondly, Paul says they are stewards of mysteries
    - The Greek word for steward means a manager
      - A manager is given something which they must care for
      - They steward something entrusted into their care
    - So it was with the apostles
    - They were entrusted with certain mysteries God intended to reveal through their ministry
    - They weren’t the authors of those mysteries, so they didn’t deserve to be objects of the boasting in Corinth
  - Finally, Paul says he doesn’t concern himself (i.e., it’s no big deal) with how he is perceived among the church, whether they boast in him or criticize him
    - A steward is expected to be found trustworthy, and Paul has a clear conscience before the Lord
    - Paul raises the point of credibility to emphasize that he serves the Lord and not men
      - Therefore, he is not seeking to receive the praise of men
      - Nor does he respond to the critique of men so as to win them over
      - In the end the Lord will be his judge

- Therefore, Paul makes the application in v.5
  - The church needs to stop making comparisons, passing judgment on each other's degree of service and assigning status to each other
    - That's a natural thing for men to do
    - But it's a product of sinful, prideful thinking
    - It's the root cause for the behavior in Corinth
    - And it's still prevalent in the church today
  - We may not have Paul or Apollos in our midst today, but we haven't defeated this enemy yet
    - As long as believers occupy sinful flesh, we'll remain prone to comparing ourselves to others in the body so we may feel better about where we are
    - I go to two Bible studies a week, but Bobby only attends one
    - I give more than Jeff, I take more mission trips than Pam
    - I attend a Bible church, I serve in the soup kitchen, I homeschool my kids
  - Paul says we all need to stop judging one another because we're terrible judges of hay, straw, precious stones and gold, so to speak
    - In Paul's day, men were criticizing him for doing the wrong things in teaching and leading the church
    - Why did they level their criticisms? For the same reason any of us criticize someone: to influence them to do what we want
    - So Paul said he paid little attention to such commentary, because they couldn't understand what the Lord had revealed to Paul
    - Paul was serving the Master and all that mattered was that Master's approval...not the approval of men who didn't understand spiritual truth
- You see, all this time we thought Paul was talking about a problem in the Corinthian church, but now Paul says it's a common issue among men

[1Cor. 4:6](#) Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

- Paul says all these things he's been teaching about (planting, watering, building) focused on Paul and Apollos in their roles as apostles
  - But now Paul says from the beginning he was using Apollos and himself figuratively for their sakes
  - What Paul means is that he wasn't talking about himself and Apollos so much as he was talking about how the church viewed each other
- Paul began this letter pointing out divisions in the body, and now he ends the opening section by diagnosing the cause of the division
  - The Corinthians were making judgments about each other, and drawing sides and assigning superiority in the church
    - Drawing Paul and Apollos into the discussion was just a convenient way to make distinctions
    - But they would have found another
  - They were determined to maintain the status culture common to Greek society
  - And Paul says this needs to stop
- Notice Paul says they are in danger of exceeding what is written so as to become arrogant
  - Exceeding what is written means living outside the boundaries set by scripture
  - In this case, it meant assigning value to things the scripture did not value
  - Boasting arrogantly in fleshly things to the detriment of unity in the body
  - Anytime we untether ourselves from scripture, we will drift into sinful thinking and practices...like dividing the body by boasting and making comparisons

- There is a pathetic quality to their boasting, because in reality they have so little to boast about
  - Consider Paul's next comment to the church

[1Cor. 4:7](#) For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

[1Cor. 4:8](#) You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

[1Cor. 4:9](#) For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

[1Cor. 4:10](#) We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

[1Cor. 4:11](#) To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;

[1Cor. 4:12](#) and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

[1Cor. 4:13](#) when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

- There was a phrase I remember kids used to throw at anyone on the playground who tried to assume more authority than they should
  - We would ask, "Who died and made you king?"
    - The message of the sarcastic statement was that the person thought they were more important than they truly were
    - That's what Paul is saying here
  - Who regards you as superior? Who says you are important in the first place?
    - It's a strong statement, but it's one the church needed to hear
    - And sometimes we need to hear it too
    - There is nothing more pathetic than to watch someone with a thimbleful of responsibility lording over others
    - Generally making a pain of themselves
    - Making clear that the church exists to serve them rather than vice versa

- Acting as if they are God's personally chosen representative
  - God already chose His Representative, and you're not Him
- To that person, someone needs to say what Paul says here: who said you are superior in any way?
- Paul asks the church, what do you have in faith that you did not receive?
  - Whatever they knew of Christ, it required that someone introduce them to the Savior
  - Whatever they understand about scripture, someone taught them that truth
  - Whatever spiritual gifts they possessed, the Lord assigned them by His Spirit
  - Whatever spiritual things they boasted about were gifts of grace, God's unmerited favor
    - It didn't reflect on them
    - It was a reflection of the love of God
- The problem was they were boasting about possessing such things as if they deserved credit for obtaining them
  - They acted as if receiving great things made them great
  - That possessing great things proved great things
  - If this were true, then every lottery winner would be hailed as a brilliant business person
- Finally, Paul mocks them for thinking themselves so great, while ignoring the plight of those men God was using to bring them the very things they boasted about
  - In v.8 Paul uses sarcasm to illustrate their selfishness and ignorance
    - He says you have already been filled, that is you have become fully filled spiritually
    - You have already become rich, referring to the rewards of the kingdom
    - You have already become kings, referring to having authority in the Kingdom

- In other words, Paul says you have already obtained all the things that we apostles are still working to receive from the Lord
  - You think you've already arrived, you no longer need to be sanctified, to receive instruction
  - The Corinthians behaved as though they had already faced the judgment seat
  - They acted as if they had received their rewards and could boast of all that they had done
- They are like the disciples of Christ who argued about which would be the greatest in the kingdom
  - They are looking past the moment and arrogantly assuming things about where they will stand in the kingdom
  - Yet they were actually far from understanding where they stood
  - The fact that they had many riches and a relatively easy life didn't mean they were pleasing God
  - And it certainly didn't say anything about Paul and Apollos that they lived hard lives with significant challenges
- Paul continues on to mock them for the way they triumph in their self-importance
  - If the Corinthian logic was accurate, what would it say about Paul and the other apostles?
    - If they were men of great worth to God as evidenced by their life of ease and achievement...
    - Then what would that say about the apostles who were suffering great hardship in the work of the ministry?
  - Paul mocks them by drawing the obvious conclusion
    - While the Corinthians were prudent, the apostles must have been fools
    - While the Corinthians were strong, that must mean the apostles were weak
    - If the Corinthians were distinguished, then clearly the apostles lacked honor

- If we're going to make assessments of each other and form judgments based on what we see with fleshly eyes, then we need to be consistent, don't we?
  - If the measure of value to God is what men value, then it stands to reason that the things men detest must be the things God detests
  - And when we compare the lives of God's appointed messengers to the lives of the newest members of the church, we see the folly of that thinking
    - Few in Corinth would have the gall to think themselves greater than Paul
    - Yet by their boasting they were creating an impossible standard, one that left them looking superior to Paul himself
- We have the same problem today
  - We're often told today that if we're poor and lacking the things of life, it's proof that God isn't pleased with us
    - Then how do we explain the apostles?
  - We're told that if we are suffering persecution, it means we haven't found the right way to approach people in a culturally sensitive way
    - Then how do we explain the apostles?
  - We're told God wants us to be happy
    - How do we explain the apostles?
  - We're told God wants to heal our bodies
    - Then how do we explain the martyrdom of the apostles?
- Paul says that if apostles were judged according to the standards of the world, then we must conclude the apostles were least valued of all men
  - God turned them into a spectacle, before angels and men
  - But we know the opposite was true, so we know human values and boasting is exactly backwards

- We need to be watchful of where we seek affirmation and what gives us satisfaction
  - If we want to climb the social ladders of the world, we can
    - But we can't climb that ladder *and* the one that leads to heavenly reward
    - We must become fools in the world so we can become wise in God's estimation
    - Because these value systems are always the opposite
  - Remember the first shall be last and the last shall be first