

Session 4



A Humble Attitude

THE POINT

Humility calls for faithfulness to Christ.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

When you're proud of your work, you want the whole world to know it.

That's how one employee of the Pinakothek der Moderne felt. The Pinakothek der Moderne is an art museum in Munich, Germany. This museum has 20,000 art pieces, but one employee thought something was missing. Despite being surrounded by works from Picasso, Magritte, and Dalí, he believed the museum needed something else—his own painting. Surely, as people stared with wonder at some of the 20,000 pieces in this museum, they would become equally enamored with this guy's work.

He certainly got noticed—and he was promptly fired. It's not clear if he was fired for bad art or the fact that he drilled holes in a wall to hang his picture, but one thing is clear: humility could've saved him from embarrassment (and losing his job).¹

His story is a funny reminder that pride usually doesn't end well. But for those who follow Jesus, humility isn't just helpful—it's essential.

QUESTION 1:

What's a piece of art you've always enjoyed?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 CORINTHIANS 3:18-22

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, since it is written, He catches the wise in their craftiness; ²⁰ and again, The Lord knows that the reasonings of the wise are futile. ²¹ So let no one boast in human leaders, for everything is yours— ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours

Our focus in this session is on humility, but I want us to see how Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 3 is directly connected to his teaching in chapter 1 on fellowship and leadership, and his teaching in chapter 2 on wisdom. In addressing the matter of leadership and fellowship (chap. 1), we need wisdom—godly wisdom (chap. 2). Consequently, as we wisely see these things from God's perspective, we respond with humble service.

Unfortunately, we don't always approach church life with the right wisdom. Churches often slip into business-like thinking—complete with corporate-sounding strategies—but God's church doesn't thrive on prestige or platforms. It thrives on prayer, sacrifice, humility, and love.

I've traveled with church leaders whose preferred reading on the trip was the latest business management book they found at the airport bookstore. There may be good principles in some of these books, but wherever we go for information and knowledge, we need to approach it with the discerning eyes of Spirit-filled, godly wisdom.

We gain that wisdom as we humble ourselves before God. "Let him become a fool so that he can become wise." Paul built on his teaching in chapter 2 by telling us that we may be a fool in the world's eyes, but true wisdom comes from God. When the Old Testament patriarch Job experienced severe suffering, Eliphaz was one of the friends who all sat with him and offered various opinions. When Paul quoted Eliphaz's words from Job 5:13—"He traps the wise in their craftiness"—he reminded us that worldly wisdom can blind us. We only gain true wisdom by humbling ourselves before God.

Paul brought this conclusion back to the issue of church leadership. "Everything is yours." As we grow in spiritual wisdom, we see what a rich inheritance we have been given in Christ. All things belong to Christ, and He shares that with His children as an inheritance (Eph. 1:11-14). We might think of that in terms of "every spiritual blessing in the heavens" (v. 3) and the spiritual gifts by which He equips the church, but Paul also included the leadership of men like Peter, Apollos, and himself. There was no cause for division within the church family.

But Paul didn't stop there. "The world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours." The reason those things belong to us is because we belong to Christ, the Lord of all things. Paul would stress this again in 1 Corinthians 15:27: "For God has put everything under his feet." Because we belong to Christ, we share in all that is under His feet.

Paul said we have no reason to boast about human leaders, and because everything is ours in Christ, we have no cause to boast about anything. There is no room for self-righteousness. No one intentionally sets out to be self-righteous, but it happens.

The longer we've been Christians, the easier it is to see any goodness as *our* goodness rather than the work of Christ in us. The longer we've

been Christians, the further we're removed from the old life without Christ. We can forget how far Christ has brought us. We can become like the Pharisee who prayed, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). Paul's words call us to remember that all we have is because of Christ. We have no room to self-righteously boast of anything.

QUESTION 2:

How can attention-seeking behavior bring harm to the cause of Christ?

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5

A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God. ² In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful. ³ It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God.

So how did Paul want the church to see him and the other leaders? "As servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God." The Greek word for "servants" Paul used literally means "under-rowers." This brings to mind the slaves in the belly of a Roman ship. Not a single slave dictated where the ship went; each slave was under orders to do one thing: row.

These leaders were also managers, a role that appears greater than an under-rower, but Paul's

use of this word stresses the responsibility and accountability of those who managed someone else's estate. The manager doesn't manage as he sees fit; instead, he is to follow the instructions and wishes of his employer. This is a position of trust, so faithfulness is the key attribute of a good manager: faithfulness to the task and faithfulness to the owner.

In Scripture, a "mystery" isn't a riddle to be solved—it's a truth once hidden, now revealed

by the Spirit. And the greatest mystery God has revealed is Christ Himself—His gospel, His church, His kingdom. The wonderful mystery God wants us to see is in His spoken Word. It is the gospel of Christ. Paul's task was to be faithful in how he managed and handled the gospel of Christ. It's all about Jesus. It's all about His saving gospel.

Paul was answerable to God—and God alone—for how he carried out this ministry. God had given him the task of serving, and God was his only master. Therefore, "It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court." Paul didn't even put stock in his own self-judgments. "In fact, I don't even judge myself." These aren't words born out of arrogance, but Paul knew his own judgments could be faulty. While he couldn't think of anything that could be held against him, he also knew that was a statement he couldn't make with full certainty and finality. "For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this." He knew he couldn't be justified and exonerated by his own self-assessment.

Paul wasn't opposed to self-assessment. Quite the contrary. He later told the church in Corinth: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves." We should continually lay

our hearts and motives before the Lord, and we must rely on His Spirit to convict us as needed and lead us to see how we stand before Him.

Paul also wasn't against all forms of judgment. In the very next chapter, he called for judgment against a man who was living in an incestuous relationship. He asked, "Don't you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:12-13). So where does our judgment begin and end as believers? We are to hold each other accountable in matters explicitly addressed in Scripture. Anything beyond that is based on our assumptions and preferences.

We can't know someone's heart or motives completely, but God can. When Christ returns, He will bring all that to light. What is hidden now will be revealed by Christ. Until that time, let's focus on our own place of ministry, faithfully serving where God has placed us.

QUESTION 3:

What does a faithful manager of God's mysteries look like?

1 CORINTHIANS 4:6-7

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: "Nothing beyond what is written." The purpose is that none of you will be arrogant, favoring one person over another. ⁷ For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?

Engage

IT'S HARD TO BE HUMBLE

Using the acrostic below, add some instances where it is hard for you to be humble. [An example has been given.]

H - *onored by others*

U -

M -

B -

L -

E -

All through Paul's discourse about leadership, wisdom, and the role as a servant of Christ, he was speaking to their understanding of his and Apollos's roles in the church. This application, though, can be applied to all of us, regardless of our role in the church. Whether you're the pastor of the church or someone who works quietly in the background, we are all to apply the need for Spirit-filled wisdom and the servant's faithful, humble heart.

This is a call to look out for others and live according to God's Word. "Nothing beyond what is written." We are to live and judge according to God's Word *only*. Our tendency is to add in our version of wisdom—our ideas of what seems best. It's not that we choose our wisdom or ideas over God's Word, but we often let our own ideas and thinking color the way we read the Bible. And because our way of thinking is clear to us, we think that's the way everyone should see things.

QUESTION 4:

What are some examples of people taking credit for what God has done?

As we develop the habit of assessing people, thoughts, and situations according to the wisdom of God's Word, we will, as Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 2:16, "have the mind of Christ." That will keep us from being arrogant. In Paul's context, immersion in God's Word would keep them from "favoring one person over another." Not favoring one person over another also means we're not favoring ourselves! We are God's people. It's God who calls us. It's God

who gives us wisdom. It's God who empowers us. In Christ's church, there's no room for ego. We're not the architects of our roles. We're servants and rowers under His command.

Military historians point to Benedict Arnold as perhaps the best general America had during the Revolutionary War. He could organize men. He was good at strategy. He was fearless. His march on Quebec, his capture of Fort Ticonderoga, and his planning for the Battle of Saratoga remain textbook cases of great military leadership. Benedict Arnold was a good leader, and he knew it. And that was the problem.

Arnold had an ego that often led to insubordination, even when that insubordination worked in the continental army's favor. But the egotistical attitude is what led him to get bypassed when the Continental Congress promoted five men to major general. Arnold's pride was hurt, so when Britain came calling, Arnold changed sides. The cause of freedom was of little importance to him if his ego could not be stroked.

Arnold's downfall was pride. In contrast, followers of Jesus are called to lay down ego and serve with humility—no matter how gifted we are. We are called to serve the cause of freedom in Christ. It's not about us; it's about Jesus. Whatever our role in God's kingdom, let's be found faithfully and humbly doing our work as servants of Christ and rowers for Him.

QUESTION 5:

What role does our group play in maintaining a spirit of humility?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out the call to serve humbly and faithfully? Choose one of the following applications:

- **Evaluate.** Examine your heart for any pride or temptations to boast. Thank God for the gifts He's entrusted to you—but if pride has crept in, confess it. Use your gifts to make much of Christ, not yourself.
- **Encourage.** Look for those who serve behind the scenes—people in the nursery, setup crew, or kitchen team. Take a moment to thank them for their quiet faithfulness.
- **Serve.** If you're not serving within the ministry and mission of your church, it's time to start. Ask your church leaders to show you where you can serve, then step in and do it with humility.



1. "German Art Gallery Employee Hangs Own Painting in Museum, Prompting Police Investigation," *CBS News*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/german-art-gallery-employee-hangs-own-art-police-involved>.