

## **“The Verdict Is In” - 1 Corinthians 4:3-4**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bible and meet me in 1 Corinthians 3...

It's good to be back with you this morning. Let's review a bit before we jump in. We spent several weeks looking at John 3, where we have an account from the life of John the Baptist. It was a story of John's fame being eclipsed by Jesus. While it would be an overstatement to say that John was entering in to obscurity given the height of popularity he had previously attained, clearly he was taking a back seat to Jesus in the end. This was by design. It was a matter of calling. It was something John not only accepted, but also rejoiced in as seen in his famous statement, *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

The key to John's embracing this relative obscurity was humility. That was the foundation. So we have studied the nature of biblical humility extensively. We have seen that biblical humility is based on a proper view of self in light of a proper view of God. We have considered several misconceptions about humility. Humility is not optional for the Christian, but required. Humility is not incompatible with boldness. And then last time we were together I ended with two misconceptions that we will explore a bit more today—humility is not incompatible with joy and true humility has less to do with contemporary notions of self-esteem and more to do with biblical notions of identity. These two ideas will be at the heart of what we consider this morning and next week.

1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians. Paul had planted the church some time back and then left to pursue other missionary endeavors. In his absence other great evangelists came through Corinth and had fruitful ministries—like Peter (called Cephas here) and Apollos or at least men connected to these prominent figures. That was all well and good, except that some people who benefited from the ministries of each of these men adopted a faction mindset. They had their favorite ministers, perhaps the one that was most instrumental in their conversion or discipleship, and they seemed to be vying for power and influence within the church based on which minister they were connected to. This created almost a party-like system within the church that was tearing the church apart.

Paul is writing to address that. The root of that divisive mentality is pride and boasting. Paul calls them to cease and desist in their prideful boasting, which is another way of saying that he is calling them to humility. Let's see what he says at the end of chapter 3 and on into the next chapter. For the sake of context I will read several more verses than we will comment on and then we will focus in on a couple verses in particular. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 21...This is God's Word...

*“So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,<sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,<sup>23</sup> and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. <sup>4</sup> This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is*

*the Lord who judges me.* <sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.* <sup>7</sup> *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?"* (1 Corinthians 3:21-4:7)

Whenever we are talking about forsaking pride or boasting and embracing humility our minds immediately run to the topic of self-esteem as it's conceived in the contemporary worldview and pop-psychology. Tim Keller gives a wonderful overview of this and how it has evolved in society in his book, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, which I highly recommend and will draw on extensively today.

"Up until the twentieth century," Keller writes, "traditional cultures (and this still true of most cultures in the world) always believed that too *high* a view of yourself was the root cause of all the evil in the world."<sup>1</sup> If you skim the news this past week you might read about the crude "comedy" unleashed on a sitting president that has led to calls for the termination of a talk show host, both sides of the aisle finding creative ways to spike the football after health care legislation passes in the House, or a nun arrested in Argentina for abusing deaf children, among other depressing headlines. What is the cause of such vulgarity, crime, abuse, and boasting? Why do people do such things? The traditional and almost universal answer in history was *hubris*, pride, thinking too high of oneself, which leads one to perpetuate such moral ills. Historically that would have been the conclusion of most in our setting as well.

Yet in our day, things have changed. A different consensus has emerged in our cultural environment. It's pretty limited to the bubble that is the West. But it's pretty much universally accepted within that bubble. Keller explains,

"The basis of contemporary education, the way we treat incarcerated prisoners, the foundation of most modern legislation and the starting point for modern counseling is exactly the opposite of the traditional consensus. Our belief today—and it is deeply rooted in everything—is that people misbehave for *lack* of self-esteem and because they have too *low* a view of themselves. For example, the reason husbands beat their wives and the reason people are criminals is because they have too *low* a view of themselves. People used to think it was because they had too high a view of themselves and had too much self-esteem. Now we say it is because we have too little self-esteem."<sup>2</sup>

Now you might wonder how such a view wins the day despite the weight of history and the contrary thinking so prevalent in the rest of the world. Why is this view so attractive to us? Why do we eat this stuff up in our society? Because it doesn't require us to make moral truth claims and judgments. We don't have to say behavior X is bad and therefore person Y is bad and therefore he deserves Z. We can instead adopt a posture of support and merely try to build people up, which makes us feel good inside and less judgmental. Of course, this is routinely applied selectively to certain groups and not others, but that's beside the point. "Nothing to see here" as they say.

Do you see the difference in the approaches? The traditional view said all the moral evils were the result of pride, having too high a view of self, and, therefore, the solution is to lower our self-esteem, get more sober minded. The modern approach says the moral evils (if we can call them that) result not from too high a view of self but too low a view of self and, therefore, the solution is to find a way to raise a person's self-esteem. These approaches are polar opposite. They can't both be right. So in light of the

passage we just read in 1 Corinthians, which one does Paul seem to side with? Well...neither really. Both views have issues and Paul's view doesn't fit neatly into either box.

Look again at verses 3 and 4 again,

*“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. <sup>4</sup> 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)

When Paul is talking about people's judgment of him, he's using the language of the court, the language of verdict. When someone judges Paul as good or bad, they are giving their verdict on Paul. If Paul judges himself as worthy or unworthy, he issues a verdict on himself. Generally speaking the people of this world base their self-esteem on one or both of these verdicts. They have high- or low-self esteem based on the high or low view that people have of them or, if they can actually dismiss the opinions of others, based on the high or low view they have of their own performance at any given time.

Given these realities, our culture has only one way to deal with self-esteem, as we've noted. We fix low self-esteem with high-self esteem. We have to offset the verdicts we are hearing from the world or from ourselves. How? Well, on the one hand, we attempt to silence the verdict we hear from the world by surrounding ourselves with people who only say nice things to us, are tolerant of our flaws, and turn a blind eye to our weaknesses. The tolerance movement is the natural consequence of that environment. We want people to only say nice things to us, so we create a cultural environment that is tolerant of people like us and demonizes those who are critical of people like us. That's how we try to mute the verdict of other people. We avoid them or we try to silence them, so that the only judgment we hear from others is self-affirming, which, we hope, leaves us with higher self-esteem. When that gets in the church, we start looking for preachers like Joel Osteen instead of like the Apostle Paul.

And yet for all our attempts to silence the negative verdict of the world, we still feel just as guilty. We can't seem to shake this sense of guilt and shame. We may make a good go of it for a while, but our attempts to silence those voices invariably fail in the end. People only overlook our flaws for so long. Sooner or later it dawns on us how intolerant the tolerance movement really is when we are found in its crosshairs. The preaching that used to tickle the ear seems to turn infectious with pain and leaves us unstable when tragedy strikes. In other words, our attempts to silence those judging voices fail and the irony is that the outcome of that failure is the amplification of their judgment. We feel more guilt and shame in the end, not less. We didn't silence their voice, we made it louder.

Christians are not the only one to notice by the way. David Brooks recently wrote a column for the New York Times entitled “The Strange Persistence of Guilt.”<sup>3</sup> The idea is that our society has made every attempt to relativize morality so that nothing is really wrong anymore and every lifestyle is accepted in the court of public opinion. We tend to feel guilt and shame for things because someone said those things are wrong, but if we can change the goalposts of right and wrong then the hope is that we can do away with guilt and shame. Yet the irony of it all, as Eric Metaxas notes, is “while we've reached the point where we've effectively cut the legs out from beneath the idea of sin, we are still very much in the thrall of guilt.”<sup>4</sup> That seems strange to us. Why would that sense of guilt persist if what we are doing is no longer considered wrong? Metaxas elaborates the point in a recent Breakpoint article.

“...here's what makes the persistence of guilt 'strange': The dominant worldviews of our age...have turned beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, into little more than expressions of feelings. They should have *freed* us from feelings of guilt. And yet we still feel guilty....This

‘strange persistence’ of guilt leaves contemporary Westerners living in the worst of all possible worlds. Secularism and relativism have not liberated them from the need to ‘feel morally justified,’ nor has it freed them from feelings of guilt. What it has done is to deprive people of the means to do anything meaningful about their sense of guilt.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s correct. And this is where the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers us hope, but we will get to that in a moment. Before we do, let’s consider briefly how we try to silence the judgment we levy on ourselves. So we are talking now about self-judgment, the verdict we assign to our self that shipwrecks our self-esteem. How do people try to deal with that? The same way we deal with the judgment of others. We try to silence it. We try to change the rules.

What do I mean? We say, “don’t listen to what other people say about you and don’t subject yourself to their standards. Make your own standards. Be who you want to be.” Now that sounds like a great idea. If you can’t live up to your parents’ standards (which makes you feel bad) and you can’t live up to society’s standards (which makes you feel bad) and you can’t live up to your contemporaries’ standards (and that makes you feel bad), then the solution, we think, is to get a new set of standards. Make your own. It’s easy to understand why people go this route. But it’s much harder to see that this is a trap. Sooner or later, guess whose standards you are failing to live up to? Your own. And that makes you feel even worse. Why? Because, if you’re honest, you realize that your standards were by necessity lower standards than the ones you were failing to meet before. That’s why we adopted them. But if we can’t even meet our own *low* standards, what does that say about us?<sup>6</sup> So we end up worse off than when we began. We feel more guilt and shame, not less.

At this point, in their desperation, some people turn from traps to lies. They try to convince themselves that they are better than they are. We learn to pep talk ourselves. “Self-esteem, self-promotion, self-congratulation, and self-admiration are now celebrated as virtues.”<sup>7</sup> We live in a “self-ocracy” and “self-absorption is the mark of our age.”<sup>8</sup> We “declare” things as though that makes them so. “I am awesome. There’s nothing wrong with me. I am better than most of these other guys. I can do anything I put my mind to. If I don’t get to my dream, I’m not the problem it’s clearly someone or something else.” And if we can tell ourselves things like this consistently for a long enough time, we may actually start believing it. But that doesn’t make it true.

That’s Paul’s point in verse 4, where he says, “*I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.*” In other words, just because you don’t feel guilty about something doesn’t mean you are not guilty. A clear conscience doesn’t guarantee innocence. That’s Paul’s point in verse 4. And just like our attempts to silence the judgments of the world, these attempts to silence the judgments from within also fail us because they don’t change reality. God is still the judge, Paul says. His verdict is still in place.

And this gets us to the alternative approach that Paul is advocating here. Look at verse 3 and 4 once more...

*“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. <sup>4</sup> 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)

So if our damaged self-esteems are owing to the judgment of others or the judgment of ourselves, then we see something quite distinct in Paul here. He’s saying that he doesn’t look to his readers’ opinions of him (or the opinion of any human court for that matter) for the verdict that he is a somebody. He even says he

doesn't look to himself for that verdict either. So, in other words, he is not trying to prop up his self-esteem in the way the vast majority of people in the world today are attempting. So where does he look for his self-image, his verdict? God. He says in verse 4, *"It is the Lord who judges me."* So Paul's opinion of self is based not on what the people of Corinth think of him or based on what he thinks of himself. The verdict comes from God. The judgment of God is the basis of Paul's self-image.

This is either really bad news or really good news. Let me explain. If left to ourselves, it would be really bad news because the only standard that matters is the standard of God. And according to the Word of God, all of us have sinned against him and fallen short of His glory (Romans 3:23). We have missed the mark. What do we deserve for such failure? Death (Romans 6:23). We literally deserve to perish and forever be separated from God in hell. That's what every sinner deserves from a just and holy God. And there's nothing we can do to undo that guilty verdict in heaven's courts. How's that self-esteem doing?

But this is where the Gospel comes in with a message of hope. God loved so much that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to save us. Jesus lived a perfect life and died on the cross as our saving substitute. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection a way of salvation has been accomplished. Those (and only those) who trust in Christ alone, and not their own efforts, for their salvation experience receive salvation as a free gift from God. They are completely forgiven of sin and are brought into a right relationship with God because God declares them "not guilty." That's what justification is—a "not guilty" verdict. Through faith in Christ, we are credited with His perfect record of righteousness instead of our own. God looks at us and He sees the believer clothed in the righteousness of Christ. "Not guilty" is His verdict. What amazing grace!

Paul knew this. This was the source of His joy. He doesn't let his view of self get blown back and forth by the opinions of the Corinthians. Paul doesn't let his view of self ebb and flow based on how well he judges himself to be doing on any given day. God is His judge. And since His faith rests in Christ, God's verdict is in. We don't have to change the goalposts because Jesus reached the goalposts of perfect righteousness for us.<sup>9</sup> We don't have to be judged based on our performance any longer, we can be judged based on His through faith. As Paul said earlier to the Corinthians,

*"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"* (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

Paul is tapping into something that is vital for the Christian to understand. Our self-worth and self-esteem should be driven by our identity in Christ, not by the judgment of man or the judgment of self. As we see who we are in Christ, we have something to celebrate. Something to boast about. Good news to rejoice in. And that good news of the Gospel is what shapes our view of self and sustains our joy. I love the way William Farley explains this, when he writes the following:

"So what is the basis for a Christian self-image? It is simple. God loves us even in our fallen condition. God does not love us because we are good but despite the fact that we are not. This shifts the focus from self to God. It shifts our confidence from self to God. In our unredeemed state, we are God's enemies. Even so, God loves us. He loves creatures that deserve to be hated. If you are a Christian, you are eternally secure in love. And you are loved because of grace, not works (Romans 8:35-39)...My self-image does not rest on my performance. It rests on God's love for me *despite* my failure to perform. God designed salvation to deeply humble me, to crush my pride, and to transfer my grounds for positive self-image from self to God. If you ever doubt the

seriousness of your hubris, look at the cross. It proclaims both the judgment I deserve and the love of God that is my boast and confidence.”<sup>10</sup>

Do you see? Our joy (and even our humility) is not really about self-esteem that we derive from our own assessment of self, but about a view of self that derives from God. Not self-esteem, but God-esteem.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, that’s the ideal Christian experience. The reality is that sometimes this Christian experience that we each have access to is not what we know day to day. We fall into some of the same tendencies of performing and pretending that we did before we were saved by Christ. In so doing, we forget or minimize our identity in Christ and our joy suffers as a result. We end up living like the rest of the world and not experiencing the liberating benefits that the Gospel affords us.

That’s what I want to explore next week. What should the Christian experience look like and why is it characteristically joyful? And how and why do we deviate from that experience through performing and pretending? And how does the Gospel give us a reason to stop doing both? I’ll also give you a really helpful visual to help you understand all this. I think you will find it very useful. So come next Sunday. Bring a friend. We will see what God does.

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, Timothy (2013-12-06). *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Kindle Locations 80-82). 10Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Keller, Timothy (2013-12-06). *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Kindle Locations 85-89). 10Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> As of the date this sermon was preached, this article could be accessed on at the following web address:

[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> This article could be accessed at the following address, as of the date this sermon was preached:

<http://www.christianheadlines.com/columnists/breakpoint/no-sin-no-forgiveness-either-the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, Timothy (2013-12-06). *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Kindle Locations 243-247). 10Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> William Farley, *Gospel-Powered Humility* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Ortlund Jr., *When God Comes to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 208.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Blessing of Humility* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), 85-86.

<sup>10</sup> Farley, 43, 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50.