

**1 Corinthians 3:1-23**  
**(Jeremiah 24:4-7; John 15:1-17)**  
**“All Things Are Yours, and You Are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s”**

## **Introduction**

In our text we again find Paul addressing a church torn by quarreling and division, division caused by a corrosive spiritual pride. This much we have seen repeatedly in our study of these opening chapters. But what was the cause of this pride?

We know that pride is often an overcompensation for insecurity, for an unease and uncertainty about one’s own worth and value, a refusal to face one’s own anxiety, a dysfunctional response to a crisis of identity. “Who am I? Am I really the person I hope that I am, that I want others to think I am?” And so, to convince ourselves and others, we create an image that we project to others and try to claim as our true self. We all do this to varying degrees. We create what Paul often called “the old man,” what spiritual directors call “the false self,” what our translations often call “the old self,” as when Paul wrote to another church, ““seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9f).

We looked last week at three different kinds of people described by the apostle: the “natural person” (2:14) who does not yet know God in Christ and has not yet received the Spirit of God; the “spiritual person” (2:15) who has been born of the Spirit and joined to Christ; and the “fleshly person” (3:1) who has the Spirit and therefore should now be thinking and acting as a spiritual person, but is still acting from the desires and passions of the flesh. This morning, I would like to step back and look at the entire third chapter in order to try to show that the essence of the problem in Corinth was a crisis in identity, and then to show how that relates to the days we are living in.

## **Body**

### **1. The essence of the problem: Identity Crisis**

Where do I get this? Am I not reading contemporary thinking about personality back into this ancient text? No. Paul makes this clear in both the opening and closing verses of this third chapter:

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (3:3-7).

Paul is pointing out that the Corinthians are seeking to bolster their identity, their sense of worth and value, by identifying with a particular teacher. They are identifying with the servants whom the Lord has sent to build them up. By finding their identity in their relationship to a particular person, they are missing the only identity that can authentically give their lives real value: identity with the one who has redeemed them and given them new life.

Paul ends by making practically the same point:

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s (3:21-23).

Isn’t this very same tendency at the root of the division and disunity that marks our culture today? People boast in their national or cultural or political or religious identity. Professing Christians too often think that it is fine to look down on people of other cultures or races or religions, especially those who may hate us and see us as enemies. We forget so quickly that “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10).

## **2. The expression of the problem: Disunity**

As we have seen, finding one’s identity through identification with a particular person or party or group results in disunity and division. Rather than being in deep, loving, self-sacrificial fellowship with one another, we break into quarreling and competing factions. Is this not what we see around us every day in ever-increasing measure, not only in church conflicts but in angry culture wars and political battles, and in a public square no longer marked by any attempt at civility?

If you say, “Well Paul only has our behavior in church in view, not how we act in culture or politics,” I would argue that such a view fails to understand the very purpose of the church, which is to display the character of God in Christ and to continue the work of Christ, the mission of God of gathering a new humanity, prepared for a new world. This new way of living should be clearly seen in Christians marked by a lovely, gracious way of carrying ourselves and relating to others in the church, in the marketplace, in the public square, and in the way we engage in politics. We should be different from the world, not just another angry faction or special interest group whose identity is with a particular issue or party or person, but those seeking thoughtfully, prayerfully and graciously, what is best for the glory of God and the common good.

This would serve to vindicate the gospel even in the eyes of its critics, because they would have to acknowledge the transformation that takes place in individuals and congregations that embrace the life of Christ. This was the apostle Peter’s point when he wrote to Christians suffering persecution, “Keep your conduct among the

Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of his visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

### **3. The danger of the problem: Destruction**

The danger is two-fold: if the disunity and division continue, they will destroy the church in Corinth, and risk God destroying those guilty of division. Too often in the history of the church this text has been misinterpreted as applying to an individual believer and specifically to suicide. However, Paul is talking here about the congregation in Corinth, the church, as God’s temple (3:16), not the individual Christian (as I hope to show next week, when we will contrast this passage with chapter six, where Paul speaks of the individual believer’s body as a temple of the Holy Spirit).

The warning is to individuals who persist in quarreling and troubling the church: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (3:17). I don’t want to say much more about this now because I hope to make it a focus of next week’s study. For now, simply remember that Paul is not speaking about God’s judgment of suicides, but rather of God’s judgment of quarreling and divisive people.

God not only loves the church, but he loves the world in which the church lives and moves and has its being. The best-known and most-beloved verse in the Bible makes this clear, although our translations may obscure it. In John 3:16 we read, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” But when we read the word “world,” I wonder how many of us grasp the implication of what John is writing. John’s Greek word translated as world is *cosmos*. “For God so loved the cosmos, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God’s love and Christ’s salvation are cosmic in scope. God made this vast and glorious cosmos and called it good. It was and still is his delight. It reveals his glory at both the micro and macro levels and those with eyes to see and minds to comprehend stand in awe and wonder at what we see of the Creator’s majesty, beauty and power. Our sin brings judgment on all that God has made. Our selfish plundering of the earth, seeing it as simply full of resources to be used up for our wealth and pleasure, rather than as the home prepared for us and entrusted to us by the Creator, risks bringing both it and us to the brink of destruction.

God’s aim, as Paul writes elsewhere, is this: “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9f). We are to be for the world around us a foretaste of what is coming, the presence of the future. Christians should be at the forefront of every movement for creation care, for peacemaking and reconciliation, for bringing together what sin has divided, for loving those whom this world considers pariahs. But instead, as was the case in Corinth, our identity crises lead to quarreling and division, which result in

disunity, which leads to destruction. Make no mistake: our pride and party spirit lead always to destruction.

#### **4. The solution to the problem: Identity in Christ**

Paul's answer to the problem is to have a correct understanding of who we are: if we are in Christ, then we are children of God, and all that we have ever hoped for or dreamed of is ours in Christ: "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (3:21-23).

If we begin to grasp and think and act upon this bedrock idea, then this astonishing description of the new humanity makes finding our core identity in anything less – whether nation or political party or theological faction – appear as the fool's game it really is. Please don't misunderstand me: We should love our nation and those in it, while also seeking the good of those in other nations; we can serve faithfully within various political or ideological groups as salt and light, encouraging our group to act with integrity and not demonize those who see things differently; we can delight in the part of the church where we are called to worship and serve, while also appreciating how much bigger than our little part is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

In sum: We can relax and stop obsessing about ourselves and our place in the scheme of things. Why? Because all things are ours, for we are Christ's and Christ is God's.

### **Conclusion**

In his memorable sermon, "The Weight of Glory," preached at Great St. Mary's, Oxford, C.S. Lewis made this very point, while wisely warning us not to let the wonder of the glory that is ours in Christ simply become yet another source of corrosive spiritual pride. He wrote:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. ....

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way for in him also Christ *vere latitat*—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.